



KEMLO  
AND THE STAR MEN

*By the same author*

KEMLO AND THE CRAZY PLANET  
KEMLO AND THE ZONES OF SILENCE  
KEMLO AND THE SKY HORSE  
KEMLO AND THE MARTIAN GHOSTS  
KEMLO AND THE CRATERS OF THE MOON  
KEMLO AND THE SPACE LANES  
KEMLO AND THE GRAVITY RAYS





Two planets, one of them spiraling across the sky


**KEMO**

*and the Star Men*

*by*

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## Chapter 1

### ARGUMENT FOR KRILLIE

'HE'S younger than any of you,' said Kemlo's father. 'Krillie will have to wait another year before he's even a junior Space Scout.'

'But he's a senior cub,' Kemlo insisted.

'There's no such thing,' Kemlo's father laughed. 'Either he's a Space Cub or a Space Scout, and well you know it.'

Kemlo grinned. 'True enough, Dad, but Krillie has a lot of sense for his age, and he showed plenty of courage when we ran into trouble once before.'

'If we thought there might be trouble on this sky patrol we shouldn't be sending you boys,' said his father sharply. 'It's not a question of running into trouble; it's a case of not using anyone but Space Scouts. There's another point too.'

'What, another?' Kemlo exclaimed in mock disgust.

'Yes, another. If I obtain the Elders' permission to let Krillie accompany you, how do we know we won't get dozens of requests from other boys of his age?'

'That's a good point,' Kemlo admitted.

apart from the fact that I promised Krillie he could go with me on the next trip I made, I think he has a right to go.'

'A right?' Kemlo's father chuckled. 'At his age?'

'I mean it,' Kemlo replied seriously. 'Some time ago the Earth Educational Committee started a competition for the best diary to be written by space-born children living on a Satellite Belt. In it they had to write about everything they do; how they spend their day, what games they play, and where they go in space scooters or on the flying horses—*everything*. These diaries had to be written by boys and girls of Krillie's age, and for a time they all were very enthusiastic. But keeping a diary properly means a lot of hard work.' Kemlo gazed frankly at his father. 'Krillie is the only one who has kept up his diary. Already he's won two preliminary prizes. I think he has a right to go with us as a sort of special recorder.'

'But your whole trip will be recorded automatically on electronic tape,' his father reminded him gently. 'You don't need a special person to record anything.'

'It isn't only the facts we record, Dad; it's the personal view as seen by a youngster like Krillie. The way he would record it in his diary wouldn't be the same as the official record.'

'I bet it wouldn't be.'

Kemlo laughed at this observation.

'Krillie has a fine imagination,' he admitted. 'He gets his facts right, but he puts in little things that make his diary more readable and not as dry and technical as an official record. I think he should be encouraged.'

Kemlo's father stood up. He ruffled Kemlo's hair in a playful gesture as he said: 'Krillie has a staunch friend in you, son, and you make a good case. I'll see what I can do.'

Kemlo jumped to his feet. 'Thanks, Dad. How soon will you know?'

'I'll contact you in about an hour.'

Kemlo watched his father's tall space-suited figure pass through the air-lock into the air-conditioned section of the Satellite Belt before he left the parents' meeting-room.

At first he headed toward the games-room, then changed his mind and went to the senior boys' quarters. Krillie would be in the games-room waiting eagerly for the result of the interview with Kemlo's father, but Kemlo preferred to wait until he had more definite news. Krillie's questions bubbled like an endless fountain at all times, and at present the most important one could not be answered.

Passing along the corridor between the cubicles Kemlo saw that the occupation light was on in Kerowski's cubicle. He pressed the buzzer and in a second the door slid open to disclose Kerowski

in the act of testing transistors while their mutual friend Kartin lounged on Kerowski's bed.

'Aha! The master has arrove!' Kerowski grated. His voice had not long broken, and at times it sounded peculiarly rusty. 'What news, O King?'

'Oh, dear!' Kartin grinned. 'It was bad enough when he spouted like that in a childish treble, but now he's half a man it sounds worse than ever.' A well-aimed book hit Kartin in the midriff and he became silent.

'No news yet,' Kemlo announced. 'I thought you'd be in the games-room.'

'Waiting for you, when all the time you'd sneaked back to your cubicle?' Kerowski scoffed. 'I guessed you'd do that, so we stayed here knowing you'd see the light was on.'

'I don't know how you could guess what Kemlo would do.' Kartin sat up, rubbing his abdomen. 'You told me you had to test your reserve transistors.'

'So I did,' Kerowski agreed airily, 'but my real and lofty reasoning would have been impossible for your lame brain to comprehend.' He sighed and cast a doleful glance at Kemlo. 'I am so right so often that my superior acumen frightens me at times.' Then he shrugged, as if shedding these cares from his shoulders. 'What is the correct reading for the direct speech transistors, Kem?'

‘Resistance or intake?’

‘Resistance.’

‘Six hundred volts electronic phase.’ Kemlo eased himself into a self-moulding chair. ‘Doesn’t your superior acumen tell you that?’

‘Transistors are not human,’ Kerowski replied as he set the testing machine humming. ‘In fact, they are greater than humans because they are infallible. But you, my boring bod, are definitely human.’

‘Thanks.’

‘That is why I can judge your possible reactions. I have the soul of a born writer—people and words fascinate me.’

‘You’d better let your memory for testing equipment fascinate you more,’ Kartin observed. ‘Instruments mean life to us in space. If *they* forget or fail, a lot of people could die.’

‘I haven’t died yet,’ Kerowski retorted, but he added more seriously: ‘But sometimes I wish I had as much knack in remembering technical gen as I have in remembering words.’

‘You’ve got it all right,’ said Kartin. ‘You just talk yourself out of it. Being dumb about that transistor test was merely an act with you.’

‘You think so?’ Kerowski seemed surprised.

‘Kartin’s right,’ said Kemlo. ‘Partly, anyway. Of course you knew the correct test reading for a transistor resistance was six hundred volts. Great

sizzling meteors, Krow! . . . if you can't remember a little test like that you wouldn't be safe in a space craft, and you've proved that you are safe.'

'Which means'—Kerowski shrugged again—'something or other, I suppose. I'll have to watch myself.' He switched off the testing machine and reassembled the transistor in its unit. 'How long before you will know whether or not Krillie can come with us?'

'Less than an hour, but I can't face all his questions until I know for sure.'

'You're keen on him coming, aren't you?' Kartin moved to allow Kerowski room to sit beside him.

'Yes, I am,' Kemlo admitted. 'Krillie has earned a trip like this sky patrol.'

'You mean because he's kept up that famous diary of his?' Kerowski dug a pack of fruit sweets from his locker and offered them around.

'He's the only one in his grade who has been able to keep it up. All the others lost interest. I think the diary is important because it's the only way Earth-boys can know how we feel about our life in space.' Kemlo chewed on the sweet for a moment before adding: 'Oh, I know there are daily bulletins and telecasts, and all the rest of the reports, but they are all put out by grown-ups; there's nothing by a space-born boy or girl. We're the first generation to be born in space,

and although we like to think we're the same as Earth-born boys—we're not really.'

'I'll say we're not,' Kartin agreed. 'They couldn't live up here without a space suit, anyway.' He glanced shrewdly at Kemlo as he asked: 'You don't think there will be talk of favouritism?'

'Why should there be? Lots of the other kids in Krillie's grade had the chance to record their impressions, but they were all too lazy to bother. You know our rules on the Satellite Belts.'

'All shall help each other. The strong shall aid the weak and the fit shall guard the sick,' Kerowski quoted. 'Each shall be rewarded by his own endeavour.'

'Sounds a bit pompous when you quote it like that,' said Kartin. 'But it's true—and right too.'

'Then why are we arguing?' Kerowski demanded.

'Who is arguing?' Kartin retorted. 'If Kemlo's father gets permission for Krillie to go on the sky patrol, that's good enough for me.'

Kerowski bounded up from the bed and became suddenly eager.

'Hey, Kem! Do you think we shall have any fun on this trip?'

Kemlo grinned. 'If by fun you mean danger—no, I don't think so. The Elders wouldn't let us Space Scouts do the patrol if it were dangerous.'



Kerowski looked glum.

'There's always the chance of something unexpected happening, of course,' said Kartin. 'Even our senior technicians admit that their theories often go wrong. Instruments are only infallible up to a point.'

'True enough,' Kemlo agreed. 'Look at the differences they found between theory and fact when they started the moon-base project.'

'And Deimos!' Kerowski exclaimed. 'Remember our trip to the Mars moonlet? We certainly found some queer things there. We were lucky to get back alive.'

'The wandering of a minor galaxy is nothing like the landing on Deimos or the moon,' said Kemlo. 'This sky patrol is only to chart the galaxy and see if our instruments can record any undue gravitational pull, or if their stellar parent was affected by a passing sun which ripped them loose. This minor galaxy is tiny, so tiny it cannot be dangerous. The Elders are only sending us to save wasting the time of first-class technicians. If the galaxy were the size of Andromeda we shouldn't be allowed to chart it.'

'*Andromeda!*' Kerowski yelped. 'There are billions of stars in Andromeda. That's a dopey comparison!'

Kemlo laughed at his friend's indignation.

'See what I mean? Even you see the difference between a wandering minor galaxy and

Andromeda. It's like comparing a pinhead with a space ship.' Kemlo stopped speaking as the audovisor buzzed and the screen flickered to light, outlining a man's head and shoulders.

'It's your father,' said Kerowski as he clicked over the contact switch. 'Hello, sir. Do you want Kemlo?'

'Hello, Kerowski.' Kemlo's father smiled. 'Is he with you?'

'Right here, Dad.' Kemlo jumped from the chair and moved to the instrument.

'I'm using a closed circuit,' said his father. 'Don't want everyone to see and hear us. Trim your channel to mine.' He waited while Kemlo adjusted the switch of the receiving channel before he said: 'Well, you will be pleased to hear that the Elders have agreed to Krillie going with you on your sky patrol. You will be responsible for him and, of course, his parents will want your assurance that you won't let him wander off alone.'

'I won't,' said Kemlo firmly. He felt like adding: 'He'd better not,' but refrained in time.

'I'm sure you will take care of him.' Kemlo's father nodded and he concluded briskly: 'I have to go now, son. Your mother and I will see you later this evening.' The screen went dark.

'Now we're all set.' Kemlo turned away from the audovisor and faced his friends. 'Let's go and tell Krillie.'

‘Ouch!’ Kerowski exclaimed. ‘I can just hear his babbling questions going on and on.’

‘Might be a change from your rusty croaking,’ said Kartin as they followed Kemlo from the cubicle.

## Chapter 2

### SKY PATROL

THE next morning Kemlo and his friends were awake early, and before breakfast they visited their scooters to make last minute checks on their equipment. Krillie already was in the launching ramp section and, by the sound of him, had been up for hours.

Kerowski, who never was very lively first thing in the morning, shuddered at Krillie's exuberance.

'Stop dancing about,' he complained. 'You make me dizzy.'

'Yah!' said Krillie. 'Just because your voice has broken you act like a grown-up.'

Kerowski studied the younger boy's impish face for a moment before he said slowly: 'I am a forbearing man, but I shall very likely twist your ears off if you don't show more respect for your elders.'

'Look who's calling himself a man!' Krillie scoffed, dodging around the back of the scooter in case Kerowski's long arms should reach to carry out his threat. 'I'll put you in my diary, and then the Earth-boys will know what sort of funniosities we have up here.'

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Kerowski drew a deep shuddering sigh and looked pleadingly at Kemlo.

'Will you get this little buzzing insect away from me, Kem? You know I feel terrible first thing in the morning.'

'You shouldn't lie awake half the night reading,' said Kemlo unsympathetically. Nevertheless he turned to Krillie and said sharply: 'You're asking for a thick ear, young Krillie, or else a paddling on your rear end for cheeking a Space Scout. Hop in the craft and watch those instruments while I check on the remote control-panel. You'd better check your craft too, Krow, or else we won't have time for breakfast before assembly. Kartin's already started to check.'

'I will go,' Kerowski replied. 'And how pleased I am that this pestiferous young scribe is flying with *you*!' So saying he edged mournfully away to join Kartin.

'What's a pestiferous scribe?' Krillie asked as he climbed into the control seat.

'Look it up in the dictionary when you get back to your quarters,' Kemlo grinned. 'You know what to watch for on the instruments?'

'I know that all the needles and dials have to move and then settle back to the red marking, which means they are under remote control.'

'That's it. Now keep your eye on them while I go across to the panel.'

Kemlo moved away from the gleaming scooter,

crossed the main floor and ascended the short flight of steps leading to the cat-walk, along which was a row of seats where a number of engineers sat in front of panels of instruments and switch gear. Because they were Earth-born these men wore light-weight indoor space suits as the launching-ramp section used for the boys' space scooters was an 'open' section, and in it they had to wear adequate protection and carry containers of oxygen and diathene.

In the air-conditioned sections of the Satellite Belt Earth-born people could move freely without wearing space suits, but the space-born children could not enter these air-conditioned sections. All who lived and worked on the Satellite Belt, spinning at over a thousand miles an hour above Earth, were so used to these differences in living conditions that they scarcely gave much thought to them. To a stranger from Earth visiting these man-made satellites in the sky it was something of a shock to find this first generation of space-born children moving without restriction through space which would kill any Earth-born person who did not wear protective clothing and carry the vital cylinders of oxygen and diathene.

The space-born boys were handsome healthy youngsters with the same love of fun as their Earth-born counterparts ; but certain physical differences were noticeable in their extremely wide shoulders, deep chests, and grace of move-

ment owing to the lack of gravity. All the open sections of the Belt had a current of gravity fed through the tessellated flooring, so that space-suited people wearing magnetic soles on their boots did not float about. The space-born children also had a magnetic strip inserted in their footwear, so that they too were governed by a slight gravity pull. Every morning they had to perform a ten-minute exercise in their games-room, where gravity power was generated at a strength sufficient to keep their muscles supple and strong.

Another main difference between space-born and Earth-born children was that Kemlo and his friends lived mainly on fruit and fruit juices, and an occasional savoury dish, but they rarely ate meat or fish. Also they could go without sleep for long periods ; but this was not encouraged within the Belt, and they had to have the same hours of sleep as Earth-born children.

Kemlo made his way to the fifth chair on the cat-walk and tapped a space-suited figure on the shoulder.

‘ ‘Morning, Tom,’ he greeted a young technician, who turned slightly in his chair.

‘ Hi there, Kemlo ! You want a check on your remote control ? ’

‘ I checked when I came in the day before yesterday, but orders are orders, I suppose.’

‘ They certainly are,’ Tom agreed. ‘ Is there

somebody in your craft watching the instruments?'

'Yes, Krillie's there. Run through the tests, will you, Tom?'

The engineer moved switches, twirled dials and said quietly into his speaker pad:

'Calling Kemlo craft. Testing on remote control. Come in, please.'

Kemlo looked across the floor of the launching-ramp section to where his scooter was positioned. He could see Krillie's curly head bent over the control-panel, then heard his piping voice through the speaker.

'This is Krillie in Kemlo's space craft.' The voice tried to sound important but didn't succeed very well. Tom glanced up at Kemlo and grinned.

'Come in, Krillie, and report,' said Tom gravely.

'All instruments now neutralised,' said Krillie. 'But there's a funny glow on the pilot control screen.'

Kemlo turned quickly to look at Tom's control-panel, then he laughed softly.

'Take your knee away from the induction lever, you dope,' he said. 'You're hunched right over the controls and your knee's touching the lever.'

'How did he know I was doing that?' Krillie's voice muttered through the speaker. He added in a louder tone: 'Sorry, Kemlo. I did have my knee against the induction lever, but I don't know how you could tell.'



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‘That is why we have a remote control-panel,’ Tom explained. ‘If you’re half a million miles away from us, providing there’s no obstruction, we have a good chance of bringing you in, and everything you touch in the craft registers on this panel.’

‘You didn’t say anything about the glow,’ said Krillie accusingly.

‘I should have done in a second,’ Tom replied. ‘I had a reading on one of the interference meters and I could soon have told you what was wrong.’

‘I see,’ said Krillie. ‘We’re clever, aren’t we?’

‘We try to be,’ Tom chuckled. He looked at Kemlo. ‘Everything else proves correctly, Kemlo.’

‘All right, Krillie, you can climb out now.’ Kemlo spoke into the speaker pad. ‘Thanks, Tom. We shall probably be contacting you from way out on the patrol.’

‘Wish I were going with you,’ said Tom. ‘It should be an interesting trip.’

‘It’s always interesting to us, but perhaps it wouldn’t be to you, Tom, because you’re a skilled technician.’

‘What difference does that make?’

‘None, I suppose, only there won’t be any excitement or danger, or intricate readings to take. This isn’t a planet we’re aiming for.’

‘There are always things to be found in the most innocent-looking objects when you’re in

space,' Tom observed. 'I haven't been here long, but I've learned that much.'

'Yes, that's true,' Kemlo agreed. 'The instruments only prove things up to a point; but I don't think there is much to be discovered about a wandering minor galaxy. And, anyway, we're not supposed to go close enough . . . ' He stopped and smiled as if at an unvoiced joke.

Tom gazed steadily at him for a moment.

'You're not *supposed* to go close,' he repeated. 'But I wonder how many times you've done something you're not supposed to do?'

'Don't tempt me. We always follow orders—unless circumstances prevent us.'

'That's what I meant,' said Tom drily. 'Well, here come some more of the lads to check their remote control. So long, Kemlo. Have a good trip.'

'Thanks, Tom.' Kemlo walked back along the cat-walk, down the steps and across to his scooter, where he checked the remainder of the instruments and equipment. Krillie helped him and tried to be as useful as possible, but the younger boy wasn't very expert at all these details, although he did his best to understand them.

'We'd better go to the stores now,' said Kemlo when he had finished the routine check. 'How many spools of tape will you want, Krillie?'

'I shall take four or five pads with me for

writing on,' Krillie replied. 'I shouldn't need tape as well.'

'If I were you, I should only take one pad for occasional notes and record the rest through electronic tape. You can have it transcribed when we come back. It will be much easier, and you'll be able to get a lot more on it.'

'Do you think so?'

'I'm sure. The recorder magazine is full, but I seldom use the passenger one on the other side of the scooter and I don't think there's more than one spool in there. We'll stock up and then you can use the recorder on your side of the craft. It's much easier than writing, Krillie.'

'All right,' Krillie agreed. 'S'pect I'm going to sound funny because I like to *see* what I'm saying. You can always do that when you're writing, but when you're recording you've said it and it's gone.'

'You can play it back, and if you don't like any of it, you can clean off the tape.'

'Ye-es,' said Krillie doubtfully, 'I suppose you can.'

After obtaining recording spools from the stores the two boys went to the rations hatch and drew supplies of food and drink in specially sealed containers. They loaded these on to an overhead trolley basket and sent it across the section to the nearest point above their scooter.

By now the nine other craft which were going

on the sky patrol had all been checked, and most of the boys were doing the same as Kemlo and Krillie—stowing away their stores in a special compartment behind the control seat of the scooter. Kerowski and Kartin, who were travelling in the same scooter, were among the last to finish this task. When they had completed it they stood to attention by the side of their craft while Kemlo and the launching-ramp section leader, a tall man in a space suit, went from one craft to another to make a final check and inspection; then the boys hurried back to breakfast.

Excitement was growing now as the time for the Space Scouts' sky patrol to leave Satellite Belt K was almost here. All the boys liked any trip in their space scooters, whether it was on duty or pleasure, but an organised patrol such as this held more promise than just a pleasure trip across the space lanes to watch the monster ships hurtle on their course through space.

After breakfast came the briefing and issuing of charts and instructions. By the time the boys reached the launching-ramp section mechanics had lined up each craft on the long ramp which led to the wide exit chute on the outer rim of the Satellite Belt.

Kemlo's craft was positioned first, and in order of seniority the other nine were spread along the ramp behind his.

He and Krillie climbed into their craft, slid

shut the canopy above their heads and gave a thumbs-up sign to one of the mechanics. Kemlo set his instruments and waited for the green signal light to flash which would tell him that he could start his power unit induction, and that the magnetised gravity ray was being fed through the launching-ramp base.

As the green light winked Kemlo opened the induction, switched off the magnetic generator which held his craft braked to the ramp, and in a flash was zooming down the ramp. The scooter shot through the exit chute and skimmed in a wide arc into the deep blue of space.

He banked the craft, ejected stabilisers and fed the powerful holding rays in a cloudy veil around it. These rays were the armour against hurtling meteorites or cosmic particles which could perforate humans and machines alike. The rays also had enough gravity power to allow the pilot to make full use of both stabilisers and power unit.

Kemlo kept the craft hovering in the sky above the Satellite Belt until the other nine scooters had come zooming from the exit chute to take up positions in a spear-shaped formation behind him.

When all the craft were assembled the audio-visor screen flickered to light and Kemlo saw the head and shoulders of two men in the main control-room in the hub of the Belt. One was his father ; the other the Duty Officer of the day.

'This is Control to leader of sky patrol,' said the Duty Officer. 'All instruments readied and correct. Gyro readings: five over two-forty. Direction readings: eleven thousand incline from meridian. Set gyros, retract stabilisers. Stand by!'

They could see the Duty Officer's eyes watching an instrument-panel; then his hand moved and an amber light appeared on the control-panel of Kemlo's craft.

'Five seconds to zero,' said the Duty Officer. 'Four, three, two. . . .'

The green light flashed. Kemlo's father said: 'On your way, sky patrol. Good luck, Kemlo.'

The screen went dark as Kemlo sent his craft soaring into the void with the spear-shaped formation streaming along in its wake.

### *Chapter 3*

#### OBJECTIVE SIGHTED

THE sky patrol fleet of scooters made a colourful pattern as it hissed across the void. Kemlo's craft was a brilliant red, the others were different colours ; blue, green, yellow, bronze, grey, pink, silver ; one dark brown, and the last was a buff colour with a red flash around its hull. This craft was manned by Kerowski and Kartin, and the red flash denoted it to be second in command to Kemlo's craft.

For the first two hours they flew in strict formation and maintained radiotronic silence. This was due to their own desire, in order to allow them time to get clear of the direct speech channels which ringed the Satellite Belt and prevented any privacy in a craft-to-craft conversation. Once beyond the range of the Belt's direct speech channels, the boys could converse with one another without being overheard by the Belt's technicians unless Kemlo linked up the master-control circuit.

But the radiotronic silence did not prevent Krillie from starting to record his beloved diary, and Kemlo smiled as his young friend strapped

on the wrist microphone and began to speak in rather an important manner.

'This is Krillie recording the start of the sky patrol. I am sitting in the leading space scooter piloted by Kemlo, Captain of Space Scouts, who is my friend. There are nine other scooters flying in formation behind us, and I am the youngest boy in the whole patrol. We are all space-born boys, and don't need to wear space suits or helmets, but we do have a special suit over our uniforms which is fitted with a transparent hood. We wear this suit to protect our uniforms, and it can be heated quickly in case we go anywhere very cold.'

Kemlo laughed as he overheard this last remark.

'That's a bit vague, isn't it? The Earth-boys won't understand what you mean by saying "If we go anywhere very cold."'

'Well, how do I know where we're going to be when it's very cold before we get there?' Krillie protested with admirable logic.

'You could explain it by saying that we are quite used to the temperature of space, but there are times when we reach some strange and uncharted space phenomenon and find that certain kinds of atmosphere make us very cold.'

'I don't think they'd understand that, either.' Krillie sighed, then he exclaimed suddenly: 'Now look what you've done, Kemlo!'



‘What have I done?’

‘You’ve been talking and it’s recorded itself, but I’m the one who’s supposed to be speaking my diary!’

‘You don’t have to talk as if you were writing it,’ Kemlo assured him. ‘Say whatever you feel like saying at the time, but when it’s transcribed you can cut out all the bits you don’t want recorded.’

‘Can I?’ Krillie asked doubtfully.

‘Of course you can. The whole idea of “on the spot” recording is to get the impressions recorded right away, because if you leave them until later, your memory can play tricks on you. It doesn’t matter at all if you record our conversation. You’ll have an exact record of everything *you* say, and you can write up your diary from all these notes.’

‘Oh!’ Krillie was silent for a moment. ‘Then if I ask you lots of questions and you answer them and we record it—I can write it later so that it will look...’ He hesitated and glanced at Kemlo.

‘So that it will look as if you know all the answers without having to ask the questions, eh?’ Kemlo suggested gently.

Krillie blushed and looked embarrassed.

‘We-ell, I don’t want to pretend I’m too clever, but it wouldn’t hurt just to pretend I know a little more than I do, would it, Kemlo?’

‘Of course not,’ Kemlo replied confidently. ‘And by the time we’ve finished this patrol you will know the answers, or most of them, anyway.’

‘Then that’s all right.’ Krillie had switched off the recorder, but now he pressed the contact again and in a more cheerful and natural voice he said: ‘Of course, I don’t know all the reasons for this sky patrol, but I’m going to find out so that I can tell the Earth-boys in my diary just what we’re supposed to do.’ He paused and looked through the canopy of the scooter before he continued: ‘I’m looking through the transparent canopy of our space scooter, and I can see all the others flying along behind us, looking very bright against the deep blue of the void. We mostly think of distances in terms of leenas, but as I’m keeping this diary for Earth-boys to read I’ll speak of distances in terms of miles.’

‘We are travelling at’—Krillie ducked forward to look at the control-panel—‘about twenty-eight thousand miles an hour. When the patrol started out from the Satellite Belt all the units were switched to full power, and for the first five minutes we were travelling at about forty thousand miles an hour. We have a canopy of holding rays which protect the scooters and form an artificial gravity arc around us, and this acts like a brake.’

Krillie paused and frowned. ‘I don’t know how to explain it properly, Kemlo.’

‘You’re doing fine. I didn’t realise that you knew so much.’

‘But how do I explain about speed?’

‘Say that forty thousand is our maximum under full power, and if it weren’t for the braking effect of the holding rays we could travel at that speed for ever in space. But we use the power unit only to start, to increase flight speed, or to use as back pressure to slow down or stop. At all other times the scooter flies without power once it has been set at speed. The holding rays knock about twelve thousand off our maximum speed, and this is part of a deliberate design to keep a space scooter cruising at about twenty-eight thousand.’

‘Oh, dear,’ Krillie sighed, ‘and I wanted this part of my diary to be absolutely super. I wanted to give all the details that Earth-boys like to know; such as speed and lots of technical facts, but I don’t know half enough to do it. By the time I’ve finished it’s going to be more your diary than mine.’

‘I’m surprised at you, Krillie. I went to a lot of trouble to get permission for you to come along with us because I thought you were a bright and reasonable chap, apart from being my friend.’

‘I want to be bright and reasonable,’ said Krillie mournfully, ‘but I don’t feel very bright, and I don’t see what being reasonable has to do with it.’

## OBJECTIVE SIGHTED

‘Well, for one thing, being reasonable means accepting the fact that you can’t know everything. There’s no shame in asking questions about things you don’t understand.’ Kemlo laughed and exclaimed: ‘Great sizzling meteors! You ought to hear Dad moan at me sometimes for asking so many questions. I’m always asking questions when I don’t understand about things—that’s the only way you can learn. It isn’t reasonable for you to think that you can start recording your diary and telling the Earth-boys all the technical details of this patrol when you don’t know them properly yourself, now is it?’

‘I s’pose not,’ Krillie replied sadly.

‘Then let’s not have any silly talk about it being more my diary than yours. It’s your diary, but we’re recording it so that you don’t miss anything. You couldn’t write all this down as we travel along or else you wouldn’t have time even to glance out through the canopy; and you would need about fifty plastic pads to write it all down, anyway. But I’ll tell you what we can do.’

‘What?’

‘We’ll call up Kartin; he’s the official scribe for our Scout Troop and he’s pretty wizzo on a transcribing keyboard. He’s passed the final tests in the latest type, too.’

‘Is that the one more like a robot?’

‘Yes. It’s only a tiny machine about six inches

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'Oh, yes, yes!' Krillie agreed eagerly.

Kemlo operated the radiotronic switches and said into the speaker pad: 'Calling Kartin in Red Flash scooter. Kemlo calling Kartin.'

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'Yes, it's about time for one.' Kemlo glanced at his micro-watch dial. 'Will you ask Kerowski to take the check for me? Krillie and I are rather busy recording.'

'Will you tell our noble commander that I shall be most happy to oblige,' said Kerowski's voice.

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'Of course I will. Be glad to. That new machine is really super, and I can do with some more practice on it. Besides, it's a good idea not to have the spools sent to the operators. Krillie's diary has to be confidential until it's been read by his teacher. You needn't have bothered to ask me.'

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## KEMLO AND THE STAR MEN

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[illegible]

I have been thinking of you very much lately, and  
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 well and happy. I have been very busy lately,  
 but I have managed to find some time to write  
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1. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 1997; 277: 1001-1005.

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‘Yes, you go ahead and I’ll answer any question I can.’

Krillie pressed the contact and lifted his wrist slightly so that the microphone could be shared between them.

‘The sky patrol is a regular duty of the Space Scouts attached to the Satellite Belts,’ he began. ‘They patrol up to a radius of about two hundred thousand miles, and these patrols are to help train the Scouts in charting courses, reading instruments and generally to gain experience in flight. But this patrol is much more important because . . .’ Krillie glanced at Kemlo. ‘Because why?’ he asked.

‘Because we are flying farther than we do on routine patrols and aiming for a definite objective. We shall be travelling for between twenty-four and thirty hours before we sight our objective, which is several hundred thousand miles from Satellite Belt K. This objective is what is known as a minor galaxy, but that’s only a general term used to describe anything from a gas cloud to semi-solid spheres or a disc-shaped constellation. An example of a galaxy is what is known to Earth-people as the Milky Way. This is a group of insignificant satellites formed around a minor star. These small cool spheres of compacted star dust swing in a steady orbit around their original solar being. They are locked in position by an eternal balance between their centrifugal force

and their sun's attraction. Millions of years ago the Earth might have been one of these, and it's the never-ending quest of space scientists to discover new worlds in the making.'

'Phew!' Krillie exclaimed. 'Is our objective all that?'

'That, and a lot more, I suppose,' Kemlo replied thoughtfully. 'That's the difficulty with anything in space, Krillie. It takes such an awful lot of explaining and people get bored with it, but you must explain some of these things if you can. The best way is to say that space scientists never ignore even the tiniest happening because the Universe is always changing and they never know when new worlds are being formed.'

'You mean that a little star can be a new world?'

'They say so. Everyone knows about the big planets, but the tiny stars are clustered together in galaxies and the big ones are what Dad calls "Island Universes within the Universe." It's so big, Krillie, it makes you gasp; but we have to just concentrate on our small objective.'

'Are we going to land on a star somewhere?'

Kemlo laughed. 'Well, I suppose landing on a star would be quite an experience, but what we really have to do is to get close to the orbit of this minor galaxy and take instrument readings and photographs and record everything so that

the scientists on the Belt can draw their own conclusions.'

'Then we're on a very important mission,' Krillie declared firmly.

'We like to think so,' Kemlo agreed. 'But the truth is that if it were very important they would send big ships and scientists, not Space Scouts. But it is important to us, and that's what really matters.'

'How do we know we're flying straight to the galaxy?' Krillie bounced in his seat and stared through the canopy. 'We can't see anything.'

'You should know better than that, Krillie. You know we fly through space for days and days without seeing anything.' Kemlo pointed to the control-panel. 'The scientists give you readings and you set those readings before you start. The instruments do the rest. That green glowing light will slowly change colour, first to orange, then to amber and pink, and when it gets a darker red the radar screen will show some sign of the galaxy ahead of us as we near it. Until then, we just fly and fly. And I think that's about all you can say for now on your recording. Switch it off while I open the speech circuit to hear Kerowski's check.'

For the next hour or so Kemlo exchanged conversations with the boys in the other scooters and received Kerowski's report on the routine check which covered technical details of each

craft's performance. Everything appeared to be going smoothly, and in a while all the scooters were switched over to automatic pilot and the boys had their first meal of the trip.

The remaining hours were uneventful. The deep blue void streamed past the hulls of the coloured scooters, and the faithful instruments logged their passing and sped the miles away behind them.

When the time came for sleep Kemlo and Kerowski alternated in acting as lead craft. After the sleep period Kemlo brought the patrol to a halt. The boys climbed from their scooters and moved about the sky, meeting one another, talking together and carrying on a sort of horse-play which was all part of necessary exercise. As they moved, the holding rays generated from the special suits they wore rippled around them and provided a slight gravity force, causing them to exercise their muscles. After an hour of this activity the boys returned to their scooters, sealed up and set off again.

There followed another day of steady flying, another sleep period; then excitement spread through the patrol when the instruments told them that they were now approaching their objective.

Anxiously they watched the instruments, and in particular the green lighted dial. As soon as this started to change colour, eager fingers tested

the controls of the radar screens until a faint image was discernible as the light grew through the colours to pink, then to red ; and ahead of them was the tiny scattering of stars, clear and bright against the dark blue void.

This first sight of their objective made even Krillie silent, for there was beauty as well as the possibility of unknown adventure in the brilliant necklet of stars patterned across the sky.

## *Chapter 4*

### THE STAR CLOUD

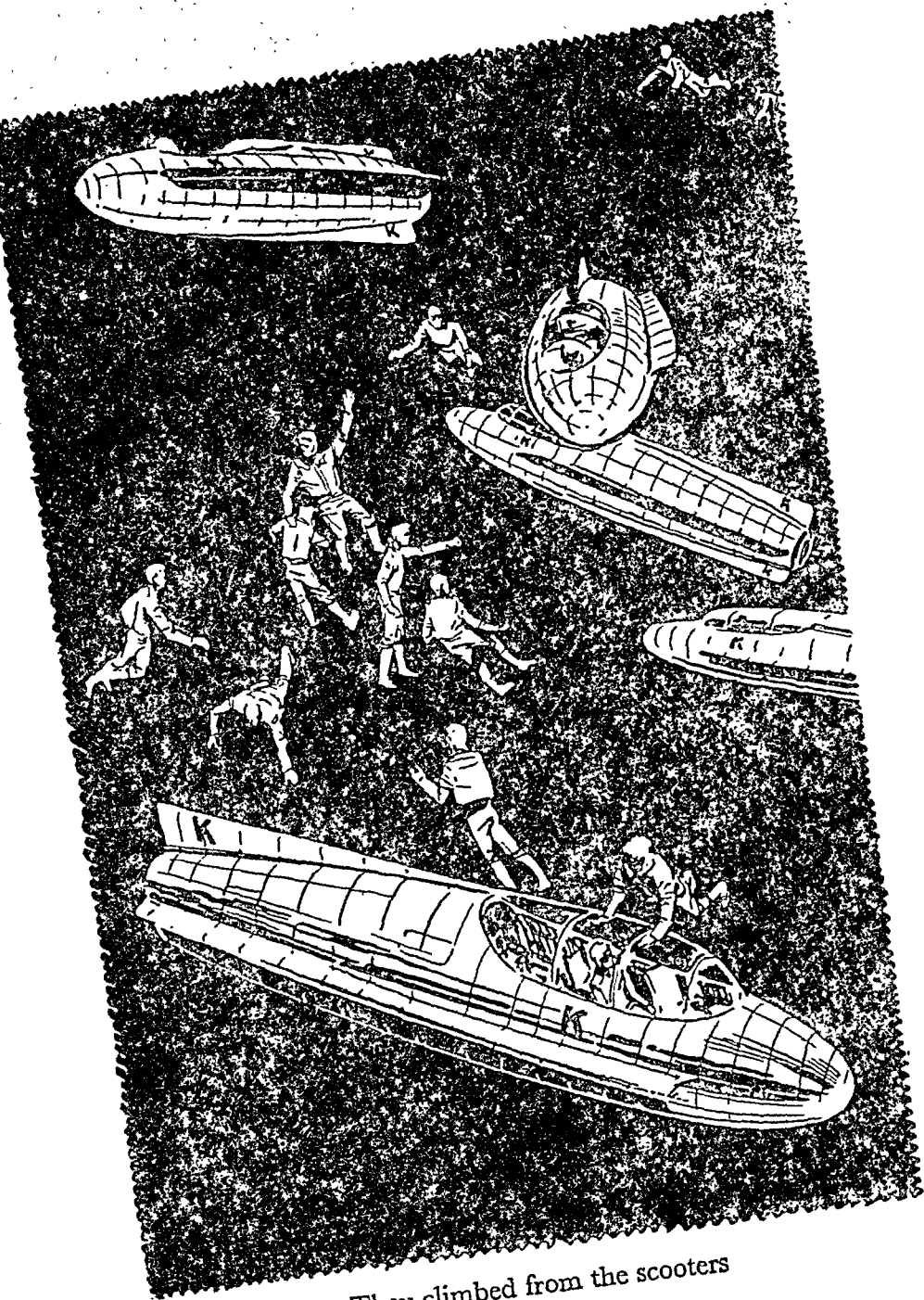
**I**MMEDIATELY the galaxy was definitely linked to their instruments, the first readings recorded and contact made with Satellite Belt K, Kemlo halted the patrol and called a meeting of his Troop leaders.

They climbed from the scooters and gathered in the sky beyond Kemlo's craft. Krillie watched them for a few moments before he switched on the recorder and said :

'The sky patrol has now halted approximately six thousand miles from the galaxy, and the Troop leaders are walking across the sky to join Kemlo. Looking through the canopy of our scooter I can see the galaxy very clearly. It's rather pretty, but doesn't look much like a galaxy of stars to me. We don't see clouds here in space as you do from Earth, but I've seen plenty of pictures of them in books, and this galaxy looks more like a shiny cloud. I don't suppose there is such a thing as a cloud of stars, although Kemlo says there is such a thing as a star cloud. I don't quite see the difference between them, but that's what he says.

‘I have written about some of the following things before, but perhaps in this part of my diary I can repeat them. We all were born on Satellite Belt K, which was the first man-made satellite to be put into the sky. All our names begin with a K and we have only one name. On Earth lots of people have the same name, like Brown or Smith, and you can’t tell one from the other unless you know their first name as well. But no two names are the same here, so everybody knows who we are. The other Satellite Belts, like S and M, also have space-born children on them, and their names begin with the letter of their Belt. All space craft attached to each Belt carry the initial letter of their own Belt and all messages sent are identified by what is called the call-sign letter.

‘Sometimes we have Earth-born children to visit us, and they have to wear space suits and helmets, and we have to look after them to make sure that they don’t get into trouble in their strange surroundings. The thing that gives Earth-born children most fun is being able to walk about the sky. We are quite used to it because we’ve done it ever since we were able to walk ; but when you do it for the first time, you look very funny because it takes a lot of practice before you’re able to walk upright. There is no gravity to hold you down and you float all over the place. But being used to it we can always walk upright,



They climbed from the scooters



although sometimes we have fun by romping about in all sorts of positions.

‘It’s very cold in space, but we don’t feel it unless we get too close to atmosphere, which is cold like your North Pole. A long time ago scientists said that nobody could live in space, but they meant that nobody born on Earth could live in space without protection. But when you are born in space it seems that you can live . . .’ Krillie laughed. ‘That sounds silly, but I’m not very good at explaining scientific things, and I haven’t yet found anyone who really can explain so that I can understand it. All I know is that we’re very happy and we hardly ever get sick, but we can’t take oxygen like Earth-born boys, nor much diathene, which is a new sort of stuff that helps Earth-people to keep well when they live in space.

‘Scientists have always said that there is nothing in space ; just nothing at all. I suppose they’re right, because you can go for hundreds of thousands of miles without seeing anything. But there is a special “something” in space that lets us live without the same sort of protection Earth-born people must have. That’s all I know about it, really, because I can never understand why people make such a fuss and think it’s so marvelous that we *do* live up here.’ Krillie hurriedly cut the switch of the recorder as the call-sign from the Satellite Belt came through the speaker.

He slid across to the control seat and moved the contact switch over. The audovisor screen glowed and the misty outline of the Duty Officer appeared on it.

'This is Krillie in Kemlo craft,' Krillie piped excitedly. It was the first time he had achieved the importance of receiving and transmitting on direct contact with Control.

'Trim your controls, Kemlo craft,' the Duty Officer ordered. 'Your voice is indistinct and your image blurred.'

Krillie possessed a slight knowledge of how to operate this highly efficient instrument, but he didn't know the exact degrees to which each control should be set. His first effort made the image on the lighted screen dance and wobble before it spun violently and then became clear. Unfortunately, the head and shoulders of the Duty Officer were upside down and the speaker suddenly barked in a harsh gabble of instructions. Something was wrong here as well because the voice was almost unrecognisable. The Duty Officer might have been speaking in Chinese for all Krillie could understand.

Frantically he twirled knobs, pushed buttons and moved switches until at last he got a perfect picture, and melodious sound poured from the speaker. A gaily dressed orchestra filled the picture on the screen, and Krillie realised with dismay that it was the resident band playing in

the concert hall of the Satellite Belt. He twirled another dial and the music was replaced by the distorted but understandably irate voice of the Duty Officer demanding to know who was playing with what.

Duty Officers, as Krillie well knew, carried a tremendous burden and were responsible for the receipt and dispatch of numerous vital messages. Danger could come swiftly in space, and the Duty Officer's job was to maintain speedy and effective contact with all craft within the orbit of his Belt. But despite the seriousness of this fact, Krillie couldn't help giggling because as the band performed the actions of playing there appeared in the forefront of the picture a singer who, obviously, was singing the latest popular song. Unfortunately, the speech channel was tuned to the Duty officer although the screen was tuned to the concert hall relay, and so the singer appeared to be voicing the urgent commands of the Duty Officer.

Krillie knew this was something he couldn't put right by himself, so he quickly released the canopy mechanism. When the canopy slid back he climbed from the seat, yelled and waved and cried :

'Kemlo ! Kemlo—help !'

The boys grouped beyond the scooter heard the high-pitched call, and in a few seconds they were hurrying toward the craft.

## THE STAR CLOUD

Kemlo was the first to reach him.

'What's the matter, Krillie? What's wrong?'

'That,' said Krillie dolefully, pointing to the lighted screen. 'And that.' He jabbed a finger on the speaker below the screen.

Several of the boys began to chuckle as Kemlo, with an exclamation of surprise, levered himself into the scooter and after several deft movements trimmed the controls until a clear picture of the Duty Officer's head and shoulders filled the screen. His voice was sharp and loud.

'And what,' the Duty Officer demanded in a voice of thunder, his face stern and frowning, 'do you think you are playing at, Kemlo?'

'A slight mistake, sir,' said Kemlo hurriedly. 'Krillie is sharing the craft with me and he's not very familiar with the controls. I'm trying to teach him, but something went wrong.'

'That's a fair explanation. For a moment I thought the bad trimming was deliberate. I know how you boys like to have a joke when you're out there alone and think we can't get at you.'

'Oh, no, sir!' Kemlo protested. 'We wouldn't dream of doing anything like that deliberately.'

'Well, forget it for now,' said the Duty Officer in a more friendly tone. 'I called you to check on the gravity impulse we've received from a point some seven degrees ahead of you. Are you picking up a stronger signal?'

‘I’ve just been discussing that with the Troop leaders, sir. A short time ago I did pick up a gravity impulse and checked with the others to see if their instruments had recorded it.’

‘And had they?’

‘Most of them had, but we’ve halted in close formation, and some of the craft are having their signals blocked by the scooter immediately in front of them.’

‘Then spread out your formation,’ the Duty Officer ordered. ‘Instruct your Troop leaders to form a semi-circle on each side of your craft. I’ll wait while you do that.’

Kemlo neutralised the speech channel and turned to the listening Troop leaders clustered around his craft.

‘You heard that,’ he said. ‘Hurry back to your scooters and position yourselves each side of me with a scooter space between you.’

The Duty Officer used the waiting time to inspect some papers, and several times he turned and spoke to someone near him in the control-room but out of range of the screen.

Kemlo waited until all the scooters were positioned, then he cut in on the speech channel again.

The Duty Officer glanced up at the sound of the signal.

‘All ready, Kemlo?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir.’ Kemlo looked at his gravity meter.

'I have a strong signal which is swinging between six and seven thousand.'

'Check with the other craft. Link me up to the circuit.'

Kemlo cut in the craft instrument, then fed this circuit into the Satellite Belt's Control channel.

'Kemlo calling all craft,' he said briskly. 'Starting from Blue scooter at the end of line; report gravity readings. Come in, Blue scooter.'

A boy's voice, rather husky and nervous, replied: 'I have a reading of five point three on the gravity meter and a hairline denoting gravity impulse on my radar screen.'

As this voice stopped speaking Kemlo said: 'Come in, Yellow scooter.'

The check went down the line on Kemlo's right, started again and ended at Kerowski's craft.

'Red Flash scooter reporting. Gravity reading seven point four. Now why should we be so much higher?'

'I should say it's because you're picking up a variable impulse,' said the Duty Officer. 'Carry on with the check.'

When all the readings had been checked Kemlo reported:

'My gravity meter is creeping up a shade.' He paused. 'Now it's dropped back. What is your reading, sir?'

'We're swinging between five and seven. Use

your infra-red binoculars, Kemlo, then have your second in command rig a camera and align it on the galaxy ahead of you.'

These preparations took a few moments, giving Krillie time to recover some of his natural exuberance which had been considerably dampened for a while.

'Can I use the binoculars too?' he whispered.

'Yes,' Kemlo replied in an equally low voice so that their words would not be heard by the Duty Officer. 'There's a pair in the clip on your side.' He focused the powerful infra-red binoculars on the galaxy ahead of them.

'Well, Kemlo?' The Duty Officer's voice sounded impatient.

'Just focusing, sir. I'm afraid I've got an optical illusion, or something.'

'Why?'

'Because it doesn't look much like a galaxy through the binoculars.'

'It won't,' the Duty Officer observed drily. 'The binoculars will cut the light and only give you an image. If you can see an image, then the gravity readings could be correct.'

'Yes, I can see an image,' said Kemlo slowly, 'and there appears to be some movement, but I can't be very sure. The movement is so slight it could be my eyes playing a trick on me.'

'That is why I want the camera. They should have exposed enough film by now.' The Duty

Officer raised his voice and called : ' Red Flash craft, cut your camera. Feed the exposed section of the spool through the self-developing box of your camera at once.'

' Carrying out your order now, sir,' said Kartin's voice, followed by an audible hoarse whisper : ' Let me do it, you dope—you're all thumbs !'

' No more than you are,' Kerowski's voice retorted. ' This self-developing release lever is too small and my hands are cold.'

' Take your time, boys,' said the Duty Officer. ' I want that exposed film out in good condition.'

There was a verbal silence although the speaker picked up several grunts and muttered exclamations before Kartin said :

' Exposed section developed and extracted, sir.'

' Thread the film into your transmitting slide,' the Duty Officer ordered. After another pause he added : ' Hold it there.'

Kemlo and Krillie saw the Duty Officer's head turn away from the screen and his voice was fainter as he ordered somebody to bring up the focus more sharply.

None of the boys in the scooters could see the film which was being relayed direct to the Belt's Control, and they had to wait until the Duty Officer had studied all the photographs. When he was satisfied he turned again to face the viewing screen.



‘The galaxy is fast becoming a star cloud,’ he announced. ‘It’s phenomena right enough and I want you to keep constant camera observation on it, using each craft in turn until all your film is exhausted.’

‘Can we move up any closer, sir?’ Kemlo asked.

‘Not more than two thousand. If the star cloud starts to join up, you could be in trouble. Move up two thousand, keeping constant observation. Coast at low speed. Repeat—coast at low speed. If you travel too fast, your holding rays might set up a gravity field and attract the star cloud toward you. It could be dangerous, so be careful.’

## Chapter 5

### A DANGEROUS RACE

‘WHAT sort of danger, Kemlo?’ Krillie asked as the Duty Officer broke contact and the screen went dark.

Kemlo shrugged. ‘It’s difficult to say. A star cloud can swirl at terrific speed, but a galaxy hardly moves at all after the first breakway from its own satellite.’ He reached across and switched on Krillie’s recorder. ‘You might as well go on recording,’ he said with a smile. ‘Hang your wrist microphone on that clip above the control panel, then it will pick up everything we say.’

‘*Everything?*’ Krillie queried doubtfully.

‘Well, everything we talk about. All the scooters’ instruments are recording everything that happens; but unless I make a special recording, which I shall do in the form of brief reports, the instruments record only sets of figures in a sort of code so that when we get back the technicians on the Belt can read the whole story of our trip from the instruments’ records.’

‘You mean, the speed we travel at and when we stop, and things like the gravity impulse the Duty Officer was talking about—all those sort of things?’

‘Yes. The big space ships have electronic brains which record everything and if necessary re-set the instruments accordingly.’

‘Oh, I know about them,’ said Krillie as he took the microphone from his wrist and fastened it on the clip above the control-panel. ‘The pilot of a space ship has all sorts of electronic recordings he feeds through the ship’s brain. We’ve had several lessons about that.’

‘What are the main recordings every ship carries when it starts from its base?’ Kemlo asked; then he added quickly: ‘We’re having a short break for the boys to make up their navigation reports. Won’t take me a couple of minutes to do mine, so we might as well talk about things that interest you. It all helps your diary, doesn’t it?’

‘There are so many things,’ said Krillie with a sigh. ‘Sometimes I feel that if I have to learn much more I shall burst.’

‘Oh, no, you won’t,’ Kemlo laughed. ‘We have to learn a lot more than boys on Earth do because we live a highly scientific life. And you needn’t try changing the subject. I don’t believe you know what the main recordings are, anyway.’

‘Yes, I do. There are three main recordings which every space ship uses.’ Krillie held up three fingers then bent each one down as he made the point. ‘The first one is the take-off instructions. These deal with such tiny var——’

‘Variations?’ Kemlo suggested.

‘Such tiny variations,’ Krillie continued, ‘that the human mind can’t move fast or surely enough to carry them out. The next main recording is the transit tape which re-sets the instruments and controls and speed and angle of the ship in flight after the first phase of its take-off.’

‘That’s good; very good. And the third one?’

‘The third one is the landing tape.’ Krillie’s last finger was bent down. ‘This is automatically fed into the electronic brain once the ship reaches the gravity field of Earth. It’s so perfect and foolproof that if everybody in the ship were dead it could still land safely.’

‘Don’t you know it’s bad luck to talk about people in a space ship being dead?’

‘Yes, we’ve been told that by pilots who’ve come to lecture to us, but our teacher says the landing tape is about the most important of all, and it stuck in my mind when he said that a ship could be landed without anybody inside touching the instruments. But there are lots of things I can’t remember. What does “return phase” mean?’

‘That’s an automatic-pilot device,’ Kemlo explained. ‘If something happens to the pilot and crew of a ship leaving Earth, the transit and flight tape runs for a certain length of time, then if there is no human hand to move the neutralising

switch, the tape automatically reverses all the gear and instruments and starts the ship on its return flight. When the ship gets within range of the gravity field, the landing tape takes over and the ship is brought safely to Earth. The return-phase invention is one of the most marvellous devices that scientists have ever thought of up to now. It means that unless it explodes, or is blown to pieces by some unforeseen obstruction, no ship is ever lost.'

'Years ago a lot of ships were lost, weren't they? In our history books it says that many of the earlier space ships sent up from Earth were never seen again; and that it's quite possible they're still flying endlessly in space.'

'That sort of thing certainly happened in the old days,' Kemlo agreed. 'But you remember that we found one of those early ships.' He reminded Krillie of an adventure they both had experienced some time ago. 'Until the ships that were supposed to be lost are found, no-one can say for sure what happened to them. Some may be circling in endless flight through space, but others may have landed on some uncharted, or even a charted, planet.' Kemlo eased up in his seat and took out the navigation log. Krillie remained silent while Kemlo filled in the technical details then returned the log to its holder.

'All this conversation we're recording is going to make a whopping big diary for me,' said

Krillie, 'but when they read some of my questions they'll think I don't know anything.'

'I shouldn't worry about that,' Kemlo assured him. 'Kartin will be transcribing it, so any conversation you don't want to appear in the diary can be cut out before you make the final copy.'

'All right. What do we do now, Kemlo?'

'In a few minutes we shall move slowly forward, then halt and spread out in a wide semi-circle so that we all can carry out a complete observation of the galaxy. I'll call up Kerowski and contact the rest of the boys.'

Kemlo adjusted the controls and spoke clearly into the speaker pad.

'Calling Kerowski in Red Flash. Come in, Krow.'

'We were snoozing quietly,' said Kerowski's voice. 'But I hear my captain call, so now I am awake and eager.'

'Just as long as you're awake will do,' Kemlo replied. 'Is your navigation report up to date?'

'All filled in and correct,' Kartin replied. 'Standing by for instructions.'

Kemlo flicked the open circuit switch and said: 'This is Kemlo calling all scooters. Are all navigation records up to date?'

He waited until one by one the Troop leaders reported back to him.

'Sky patrol will prepare to move ahead.'

point five degrees at low speed. All craft will then halt and await instruction for positioning in large semi-circle. Open inductions. Prepare to take off. Over and out.'

Kemlo leaned back, manipulated the controls, and slowly the scooter began to move forward. He glanced through the canopy on each side of him, watching the line of coloured scooters sweeping forward. Suddenly he sat up with a jerk and exclaimed :

'What's the matter with them? Don't they understand plain words?' He flicked the open circuit switch. 'Calling Blue, Yellow, Brown and Green scooters. Hold back! You're too fast!'

In answer a babble of cheerful voices greeted him, but one above the rest yelled: 'We'll race you, Kem!'

'This isn't a time for races,' Kemlo called sharply. 'Cut your induction. Slow down!'

Krillie, sensing the tension, had jumped to his feet and was gripping the support rail as he watched the other scooters streaking ahead.

With swift deft movements Kemlo made more adjustments to the instruments.

'Calling Red Flash,' he said. 'Blue and Green are nearest to you. Put on speed and head them off. If they don't stop, throw out your magnetic beam and neutralise their induction. I'll go after the others.'

## A DANGEROUS RACE

Grimly he opened the induction, re-set the gyroscopes and stabilisers and sent the craft hurtling forward.

'Hang on, Krillie!' he cried. 'We'll have to teach those dopes that this isn't a sports session. They've got to obey orders.'

'Faster, Kemlo, faster!' Krillie urged, jumping up and down in his excitement. 'They're getting ahead of us.'

'They won't for long,' said Kemlo tensely.

He fed more power to the induction, withdrew the stabiliser fins and the craft surged into top speed. Both Kemlo's and Kerowski's scooters had the latest type of power unit, and were some ten thousand an hour faster than the other craft. Although maximum power was not supposed to be used except in emergency, Kemlo considered this to be a suitable occasion, if not an actual emergency.

He was aware of Krillie chattering excitedly into the microphone, determined not to miss any description of this chase through the sky. Away to their left the Red Flash scooter was zooming around in a wide arc, preparing to head off Blue and Green; ahead of them the minor galaxy danced in a swirl of light.

The colossal speed that Kemlo's craft now had reached brought it easily ahead of those he was following.

'Cut your power and turn back,' he ordered,



keeping the contact switch on open circuit so that all the other scooters could hear him. 'Slow down, or I'll have to force you to stop. This is no time for fun and games—nor races. It can be dangerous for all of us. I'll give you one more chance to slow down.'

'All right, Kemlo,' a disgruntled voice replied. 'We just thought it would be fun, but perhaps you're right. Slowing now and preparing to turn.'

'Hurry it up,' Kemlo urged, glancing ahead, then back at his instruments. 'We've overshot by nearly four thousand already.'

Suddenly the scooter gave a violent jerk and Krillie fell with a flaying of arms and legs. After a moment he picked himself up and grabbed the support rail even more tightly, looking quite scared now.

Kemlo wasn't feeling particularly brave at that moment—that jerk had meant a tremendous increase in speed. An increase far above any of which his power unit was capable. He cut the induction and trimmed the stabilisers slowly in order not to cause too much strain on the hull. The holding rays were rippling around the craft—certain evidence that this protective shield was reacting to some, as yet unseen, obstruction.

He glanced through the canopy and saw the Red Flash scooter travelling in a side-slipping action. He thumbed the speaker control and cried :

'Straighten out, Krow! Straighten her out. You're putting too much strain on the hull!'

'I can't straighten her,' Kartin's voice replied. 'We're slightly ahead of you and picking up more pull. What is it, Kemlo?'

'I don't know yet. After that terrific burst of speed I daren't reduce the induction too fast.'

'We're in the same fix.' Kerowski's voice came clearly through the speaker. Despite his sometimes dithering and flapping manner, Kerowski generally responded sharply to an emergency. 'Bring her round,' he urged Kartin. 'Try to level out.'

'I *am* trying, you dope!' Kartin's voice sounded tense. 'This pull's caught us on the turn.'

'Eject your starboard stabilisers,' Kemlo advised. 'That should bring you round.' He looked at the control-panel. 'Great sizzling meteors!' he exclaimed. 'We're only three thousand off the galaxy! We'd better stop pretty soon or else we shall be in trouble!'

He cut the induction, but felt the hull tremble and knew that he dared not ease back any faster.

'I can't use back pressure yet,' he called to Kartin. 'With this pull against us I might strip the hull.'

'Nor can we,' said Kartin, 'but we're running practically on no power. We can't reduce speed.'

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‘Look at the screen, Kemlo! Look at the screen!’ Krillie yelled.

‘That’s gravity!’ Kemlo exclaimed. ‘Have you got it, Kartin? Are you showing gravity plus?’

‘We certainly are,’ Kerowski’s voice replied. ‘No wonder we can’t slow down. If this gravity pull keeps up and we exert back pressure—we’ll blow up.’

‘You’re right. Krillie, look back and see how far behind us the others are.’

Krillie turned, bobbed his head up and down, looking this way and that, but when he turned back to Kemlo he said in a slightly worried voice:

‘I can’t see them at all, Kemlo!’

‘Put on your visors, quickly. You, too, Krillie. Hurry!’ Kemlo spoke urgently. ‘We’re getting too close to the galaxy and there may be solar concentration.’

From the spring-front locker at the side of the control-panel Krillie grabbed two helmet visors and swiftly he and Kemlo donned them.

‘Power unit swinging slightly to back thrust,’ Kemlo announced. ‘Having no effect though. Daren’t try any more. How is it with you?’

‘Just the same,’ Kartin replied. ‘Visors are on, but there’s not enough glare to see through them properly yet. Are we heading straight on to the galaxy, Kem?’

‘We should be above it,’ said Kemlo, peering

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closely at the instruments. 'There's too much  
interference to take proper readings. Eject the  
tail fin and try to get an incline in flight.'

Desperate moments passed until Kerowski's  
voice said tensely: 'She won't answer, Kem.'  
'Nor will mine,' said Kemlo. 'Neutralise all  
gear. Cut magnetic impulses. Make your craft  
dead. Might save us from catching fire or being  
blown up. Try to keep close together. Main-  
tain contact by beam light.'

He had just finished speaking when suddenly  
the void seemed to swirl around them and their  
craft was tossed into the depths of an unknown  
cosmic force.

## Chapter 6

### STAR WORLD

THE swirling cloud-like mass around them gave an optical illusion that the craft itself was spinning ; but after a few moments Kemlo realised that, although still falling at an alarming speed, the scooter remained steady.

He glanced at Krillie and saw the younger boy's eyes were wide with fright, but he was making an obvious effort not to show his fear. Swiftly Kemlo reached out a hand and gripped Krillie's shoulder.

'Hang on, old son,' he said encouragingly. 'We'll be all right.'

'Ye-es, K-Kemlo.'

Perhaps it was fortunate that Kemlo had to make a show of confidence in front of Krillie, for he was very near to panic himself. But this effort steadied his mind and forced him to think calmly and coolly. The scooter was passing through something which was whirling around it. This meant that the cloud itself was not gravity-laden, otherwise they would be spinning with it instead of falling through it.

The gravity meter showed a positive and increasing reading ; therefore the craft was

definitely in the orbit of some solid substance. Kemlo checked the altmeter and the dial which showed degrees of energy emanating from any substance within range. These two instruments were rarely affected, and he had had very little experience of assessing their readings, even though he had been thoroughly trained to do so. But at a time like this, training was not as helpful as being able to call upon practical experience. The space scooters seldom ranged over substances but were used for training the senior boys in space flight around the Satellite Belts. Flying distances of between five hundred thousand and a million miles were quite normal, but, almost without exception, the craft remained in space. However, these extra instruments were fitted in case an emergency should arise. And now that the emergency had come, Kemlo's mind was working furiously in trying to remember what information the instruments conveyed.

At last his groping mind struck the chord of memory and, by taking the readings of the altmeter, the energy-resistor, the gravity meter and the now flashing light circling the dial in the direction finder, he was able to transfer his knowledge from thought to action.

He switched the power unit to reverse thrust, ejected the stabilisers to the limit of their travel, and increased the density of the holding rays beneath the scooter's hull. Then he opened the



induction to full power, and the braking effect was so sudden that Kemlo was raised from his seat and Krillie again tumbled into a heap on the floor of the scooter, where he remained, whimpering a little and trying hard not to scream out loud.

As Kemlo thumped gently back on to his seat, feeling the scooter steady under him, he knew that his reasoning had been correct, and although the substance was drawing them down toward it, they no longer were plummeting headlong but floating gradually and very steadily. He could do no more now until he could see the point or object from which the gravity pull emanated, or the craft settled against it.

He leaned across from the control seat and pulled Krillie upright, putting his arm around the other boy's shoulders and holding him firmly.

'It's all right now, Krillie,' he said gently. 'We just got bumped about a bit, but everything's all right. You sit back in your seat and we'll fasten the safety straps, then you can switch on the recorder and tell your diary all that's happened in these past minutes and describe what is happening to us now. It's very important to do that, you know.'

'I c-can't t-talk!' Krillie didn't normally stutter, but sudden fear or excitement sometimes did affect him like that.

'Of course you can talk,' said Kemlo. 'I bet you'll have plenty to say about this when we get back to the Belt. But now's the time to say what you really feel, when things are happening around you. That's a *real* diary.'

Krillie's wide eyes gazed seriously at Kemlo; then he blinked rapidly.

'I'm not very b-brave,' he murmured.

'Nor am I,' said Kemlo with a wry smile. 'Nobody is very brave when they're up against something they don't understand. The best thing to do is to carry on with the things you do understand—like you recording your diary and me working the controls.' Having fastened the safety belt around Krillie he gave his young friend's nose a little twist. 'Come on,' he said firmly. 'Start recording.'

Thus encouraged, Krillie switched on the recording and began to speak in a rather trembly voice.

'We seem to have fallen through a cloud, but it isn't a cloud and we don't know what it is. It might be star dust, which sounds silly, but it wouldn't sound silly to you if you were falling through it. It's awfully scary because we can't see very far through the canopy of the scooter. When you first look out it seems as if we're spinning around and around, but it's not the scooter that's spinning but the cloud outside that's doing all the turning. It's a funny sort of cloud that

looks as if it has a light shining through it. A purple and red light.

‘My friend Kemlo is very brave and quick, and he’s stopped the scooter from falling down ever so fast so that we’re now floating gently, although a few minutes ago, when Kemlo stopped us falling by doing something to the controls, the craft gave a terrific bump and I fell over again. I was very frightened. Kemlo says that he was frightened too, but he doesn’t show it like I do.’ Krillie looked across at Kemlo as he said: ‘It seems to be warmer now. Don’t you think it’s warmer?’

‘I hadn’t thought about it until now, but you’re right, Krillie.’

‘Changes of temp-temp-temptures’—Krillie stumbled over the unfamiliar word as again he spoke into the microphone—‘are very important to us because tempture in space is always cons-cons . . . it’s always the same,’ he added with a rush. ‘Earth-born people find it very cold indeed, but we like it. We don’t mind when it gets warmer, as it does in our sunray-room and our games-room sometimes, but we’re quite comfortable when it’s too cold for Earth-people. I keep looking through the canopy of the scooter, but I can’t see much, except this funny sort of cloud around us and the rather pretty light which shines through it. It does *seem* to be getting lighter now.’



The radar screen lighted

‘It is getting lighter,’ Kemlo agreed, ‘and the cloud is clearing.’ He glanced at the instruments. ‘Gravity meter’s moving up steadily.’ He manipulated switches on the control-panel until the radar screen lighted and gave a mirror-like reflection, then he raised his voice so that the recording microphone could pick up his words clearly.

‘In our space scooters we have fitted the latest dual-purpose radar and televiewer instruments,’ said Kemlo. ‘This is apart from the normal televiewer on which we see the image of the person talking to us from somewhere like a Satellite Belt control-room. The televiewing instrument is two-way and the screen which shows the image of the person calling us also transmits our image to their screen. But the dual-purpose radar telescreen picks up impulses as a radar screen or images as a televiewer screen. We seldom use it though, because the only things we see on normal flights are space ships which can be viewed better with our own eyes through the canopy, or the Satellite Belts, which, when we’re close enough, we see in the same way. But on this radar telescreen which previously, before I retuned it, was showing a substance below us as a radar reading, is now forming a hazy dimly lit picture. Can you see it, Krillie?’ Kemlo moved back to allow Krillie a better view.

‘Yes, I can see it,’ said Krillie, speaking into

the microphone. 'It's very dim and a lot like the moving cloud I've been talking about, but in the centre there's a dark blue pattern. I don't know what that is or what it means, but it's getting bigger very slowly. And I'm getting awfully thirsty.'

'Then switch off the recorder and have a drink,' Kemlo suggested.

Krillie quickly obeyed; although he didn't like to admit it, he was finding this factual recording of his diary less easy than he had thought it would be. But he really was thirsty and his throat was quite dry, so he gulped the fruit drink gratefully when Kemlo handed him a flask from the food compartment at the back of the seats.

'That's better,' Krillie sighed as he handed the flask back to Kemlo, who took a long pull at it. 'What do you think that thing on the screen is, Kemlo?' He seemed to have recovered from his fright and was becoming, if not eagerly excited, at least very interested in what was happening. He peered intently at the instruments and watched the screen, leaning forward and straining against the protective safety straps.

'It can't be a meteorite,' Kemlo replied slowly and thoughtfully. 'It's not moving and it's half filling the screen now.' He adjusted switches and dials, bringing the picture into sharper focus and setting a needle swinging around one of the

instruments. Pointing to this he said: 'Now we're getting a definite height reading. We're about four thousand feet above it, descending slowly. It's certainly a substance with a strong gravity pull, and already it's showing a slight reading of atmosphere. I hope there isn't too much atmosphere,' he added grimly. 'This is one time when a space-born boy wishes he were an Earth-man. Oxygen is life to an Earth-born person, but too much of it can be . . .' He hesitated. 'Well, pretty bad for us.'

'You mean it can kill us,' said Krillie bluntly.

'We won't think about that,' Kemlo replied.

'We have very efficient atmosphere measures in the hull of the scooter, and while we keep the canopy shut we can hermetically seal ourselves inside the craft for long enough to fly it up again.'

'Then why don't we fly up now?'

'Because we want to find out what is below us, and until we do I shan't get the correct readings to tell me how much power I need to get the scooter clear. There are quite a few other technical things as well as that, but I won't go into them now.' Kemlo suddenly leaned forward in his seat and grasped Krillie's hand in his excitement.

'I can see it through the canopy! Look down, Krillie, and you'll see it too. It's just like those pictures we see in books taken from a ship flying above Earth. It's like an island—

just like an island. It seems to have a dark blue sheen over it.'

'It's not shiny though. It looks rough,' Krillie observed. There was silence for a moment before he asked in a doubtful voice: 'It couldn't be a star, could it, Kemlo?'

'Of course it could be a star,' Kemlo replied quietly. 'A galaxy is part of the star world, and we've come thousands of miles through a star cloud.' He laughed nervously. 'Landing on a star is going to sound rather funny in your diary—I hope!'



## Chapter 7

### BRIDGE OF COLOUR

THE scooter now was planing in gentle spirals, leaving the purple-red cloud and entering an area of pearly-coloured light. Cautiously Kemlo raised his visor, then announced :

‘We can take these off, Krillie. The solar meter is registering only normal solar concentration, and this pearly sort of light is very soothing.’

They removed the visors and Krillie stowed them away in their locker while Kemlo manipulated the open-circuit speaker controls.

‘Kemlo calling Red Flash,’ he said clearly. ‘Kemlo calling Red Flash. Come in, Kerowski. Can you hear me?’ He looked at Krillie, a worried expression on his face when only the hum of the open circuit came through the speaker.

‘That’s funny,’ said Krillie. ‘Why don’t they answer?’

‘Switch on the microphone and let’s record some more impressions for your diary. I don’t think I’ll bother making any special reports; we’ll use all the recording spools for your diary instead.’

‘But your reports will be all mixed up with my diary then,’ Krillie protested.

'We can extract them when we get back.'

Krillie looked at him doubtfully. 'If we get back,' he ventured.

'That's no way to talk, or to think,' said Kemlo sharply. 'In a few minutes we'll be settling on that surface beneath us.' He raised his voice slightly as Krillie obediently pressed the recording switch and said: 'All our instruments are functioning correctly at approximately a thousand feet above the surface of what appears to be a barren sphere. There is no abnormal reaction, except in radiotronic communication. This can make things rather difficult for us because I had hoped to land safely and establish contact, not only with the rest of the patrol but also with the Satellite Belt Control. As the instruments are not faulty, perhaps there is something in the cloud through which we've just passed that prevents the radiotronic waves from getting through. I'm only guessing, of course, but it seems a reasonable guess.

'We're descending in slow spirals, and both the craft and its flying controls are behaving perfectly. It's getting lighter all the time, although not dazzlingly bright. A pleasant pearly-coloured glow surrounds us and looking down we can see a large expanse of what appears to be a rocky surface. From a distance it seemed bluish in colour, but perhaps the light is making it look grey now, and this might be its real colour; a

colour similar to that, so I've been told, of meteors after they have cooled.

'We are now only four hundred feet above the surface, and Krillie is securely strapped into his seat while I'm just fitting on my safety straps. We'll leave the recording circuit open so that both our comments and any other sounds can be picked up, but we won't speak again until the scooter touches the surface.'

Kemlo leaned back and, after fastening his safety straps, concentrated on the flying controls.

When within a hundred feet of the surface he applied full back pressure which lifted the scooter slightly, then set it down in a hovering movement; lower and lower until, with a gentle bump, it rested on a hard surface. Kemlo immediately neutralised the controls and cut the induction.

The whirl of pressure from the power unit had been quite loud, and the silence came so abruptly that it made them almost hold their breath. Usually when flying through space there was only a whisper of sound from the power unit, but now that they were surrounded by solid substances and a certain amount of gravity, the sound had been greatly magnified.

For a few moments they remained strapped in their seats. Krillie gazed half eagerly, half fearfully, through the canopy, but Kemlo, intent on making sure that the controls and instruments

were correctly positioned, was too busy to observe the area beyond the scooter. When he was able to do so he exclaimed :

‘It looks like a whole heap of nothing out there, Krillie!’ He glanced upward. ‘And that cloud is still swirling above us. Can you see any signs of movement on your side?’

‘Nothing at all.’ Krillie pressed his nose against the side of the canopy in an effort to see more clearly. ‘It’s quite bright and the surface goes for as far as I can see, but there’re only bumps and cracks and ledges. It isn’t grey any more, Kemlo ; it’s a sort of brown colour.’

‘That’s what I thought too,’ Kemlo agreed. ‘It must be the light that gives it the grey effect. Well, we’ve settled on a firm substance right enough, but just what it is I don’t know. There’s not a great amount of heat, although it’s warmer than space, but no more than we can stand. There’s also a slight reading of atmosphere, but I don’t think it’s high enough to harm us. Do you feel all right, Krillie?’

‘I feel sleepy—and kind of heavy.’

‘That’s the gravity pull affecting us. Don’t try to move quickly ; just make all your actions slow and careful, or else you’ll get very tired and your muscles will ache.’

Kemlo unfastened the safety straps for both of them and leaned forward close to the control-panel.

'We're beamed to the patrol's circuit, and they should be hearing everything we say. Yet there's silence—complete silence. Why don't we pick up interference from whatever is blocking our reception?'

'I don't know,' said Krillie sadly. 'And I'm beginning to get scared again. Suppose we never leave this horrible old place and nobody ever speaks to us again?'

'You've got too much imagination,' Kemlo retorted. He wanted to be sympathetic because he felt slightly scared himself at the thought of being lost on this empty grey-brown substance. But he knew it was no use feeling sorry for themselves. 'This is all part of a space boy's life, Krillie,' he said. 'What's the use of boasting about being a space boy then getting frightened when something like this happens?'

'You're cross with me.' Krillie's voice was accusing and his lips pouted.

'I shall be, if you don't stop feeling sorry for yourself. This is an adventure; something new and strange, but nothing to be afraid of. It's something we have to try to understand, and master. How do you suppose the early space pioneers felt when they landed on places like this?'

'They were grown men,' Krillie mumbled.

'What difference does that make? We've got as much feeling as a grown-up has. We've got

a brain to use, a mind to help us understand and a body to give us physical strength. We don't have to be heroes, but at least we can be sensible and appreciate that when we *are* grown up there may be lots of times like this, and being grown up won't make us like it any more than we do now.'

'You're only talking at me because you're scared yourself.' Krillie flared with sudden temper and, whether or not he knew it, some truth.

Kemlo turned his head slowly and looked steadily at Krillie.

'You're quite right,' he agreed calmly. 'You're muttering and mumbling and wanting to go home, and I'm getting angry with you because I'm angry with myself for being scared. We are a couple of dopes, aren't we?'

This self-accusation made them both feel better. Krillie giggled, and in a moment they were laughing as the mood of depression lifted from their minds and some of the earlier excitement returned.

'I feel better now,' Kemlo declared. 'There's a reason for everything, Krillie; at least there ought to be, but as far as our transmitting and receiving instruments are concerned—only two things can block them.'

'One is a deliberate projection of a magnetic barrier which kills the life of any transmitting or receiving wave,' said Krillie promptly and with an air of importance.

‘Well, well!’ Kemlo exclaimed. ‘Listen to the expert! Where did *you* learn that?’

‘Oh, I just remember things sometimes,’ Krillie replied with an airy wave of his hand; but he added in a more natural tone: ‘That’s right, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, quite right. Engineers can send out a magnetic barrier to block all sound waves. In fact, for some time the electronic waves we used for cooking interfered with reception and transmission. But those are man-made and there isn’t anything man-made between here and our Satellite Belt.’ Kemlo glanced around at the area outside the scooter. ‘Nothing that we know of, anyway,’ he added, ‘so it must be the other reason.’

‘I don’t know anything about another reason,’ said Krillie.

‘The other thing is a natural obstruction; a magnetic field set up by a high-speed shower of cosmic particles, or similar disturbances in space. But those natural obstructions last a very short time—only a few seconds—and when that happens you get a terrific roaring in the speaker. The obstruction causing it can sometimes be identified because the instruments pick up such powerful interference that the noise blanks out all speech or sound of any sort coming through the speaker.’

‘But we can’t hear anything at all. Are you sure the instruments aren’t damaged?’

'They're not damaged,' Kemlo replied confidently. 'I've checked and double-checked, and they're all functioning perfectly, except that they're not receiving anything, nor, as far as I can tell, are they transmitting anything. And yet'—he hesitated and scratched his head thoughtfully—'they *are* transmitting, because the signal light comes on every time I try to send a message.'

'That means the message is leaving the scooter but not getting anywhere?' said Krillie. It was such a long time before Kemlo spoke that Krillie nudged him. 'Doesn't it, Kemlo?' he asked.

'Yes, it does,' Kemlo replied a trifle absent-mindedly. 'But I've just thought of something else.'

'What?'

'We'll forget about its being a man-made obstruction and concentrate on cosmic disturbance.' Kemlo smiled as he added: 'You know, Krillie, I'm not so sure that you weren't right when you said if you had to learn much more you'd burst. I'm trying to remember something I should have learned more thoroughly but didn't. I'm sure that Earth-boys don't have to learn as much as we do, particularly on the technical side. We once had a lecture by a radio officer from one of the big space ships. He told us about various disturbances and the effect on his instruments during some of his flights. If I



remember rightly, he said that it was very difficult to find an answer to some of them because a disturbance didn't last long enough to identify it properly. He told us that scientists admitted there was an explanation for everything but, at the same time, there were a lot of things they weren't able to explain.'

'That sounds crazy,' said Krillie bluntly.

'I know,' Kemlo laughed. 'That's the whole point. Everything is so clever nowadays and we have such marvellous instruments that when we come up against a new problem, we try to be even more clever, and that's what this radio officer meant. I remember that he advised us to do just what we are doing now.'

'But we're not doing anything, as far as I can see.'

'He said that the most valuable thing any man could do when confronted with something in space he didn't understand was to sit and talk it out and work it out, because there's all the space in the Universe around you and plenty of time,' Kemlo explained. 'He said that in the early days many ships were lost and pilots killed because they panicked and tried to do things in too much of a hurry. We've been trained not to do that.'

'You have,' Krillie agreed. 'I'm not old enough yet, but I know you get lessons about it.'

## BRIDGE OF COLOUR

'It's one of our mottoes,' Kemlo replied. '“Pause and ponder.” Sounds a pretty soppy thing to say, but there's a lot of truth in it. When faced with a difficulty, pause and ponder. Well, I'm doing plenty of pondering right now, and I think we've got a simple answer.'

'You mean an answer to why we can't send a message or receive one?' Krillie's voice became eager.

Kemlo nodded. 'The only obstruction that I can think of must be in that star cloud swirling above us.' He looked upward. 'It seems to be getting lighter too, and spreading more. I think if I send out a powerful electronic beam by ejecting it through one of the holding-ray nozzles in the hull, we should be able to measure how far away the obstruction is by measuring the electronic wave, both on the radar screen and by listening to its sound on the speaker. It's worth trying, anyway.'

'What will happen if you're wrong?'

'Well, there's substance around us. If the electronic beam strikes any substance which is inflammable it's liable to explode it. That's the only risk, but it will be a long way from us.'

'It wouldn't hit one of the other scooters?'

'It wouldn't travel that distance. Anyway, we'll try it and see.'

'What can I do to help?'

'I'll show you. You'd better switch off the

recorder now. We've got all our conversation down so we'll just report results of our test later ; it'll save the tape. When I feed the electronic power into the right-hand nozzle, I want you to press this key when I give you the word.' Kemlo pointed to an orange tab-like key on the lower part of the control-panel. 'I shall be using both hands and won't be able to reach it. Move forward in your seat, Krillie, so that you can press it quickly when I tell you.'

The next few moments were spent in adjusting instruments and dials and making a careful check on which holding-ray nozzle it would be best to use for the angle of impulse. When Kemlo was ready, keeping both his hands on the finely tuned dials, he nodded to Krillie and said :

'Press it—now !'

The speaker crackled and hissed and, although nothing was visible beyond the canopy of the scooter, on the radar screen a tiny flickering dot appeared and spread from the centre toward the upper right-hand corner.

Anxiously Kemlo watched the dials, particularly that of the impulse meter. Suddenly there was a terrific burst of crackling from the speaker, and the image disappeared from the radar screen. The impulse meter light flashed red and the needle stayed steady.

'Release the key now, Krillie.' Kemlo leaned back in his seat. 'That's it !' he exclaimed.

'The obstruction is in that cloud six thousand feet above us. There's nothing man-made about it and nothing to be afraid of. I'll inspect this substance we've landed on and try to get a few pieces of the surface to take back for the analysts to work on ; then the quicker we take off and get through that cloud again the better.'

'Quiet, Kemlo, quiet !' Krillie cried abruptly. While Kemlo had been speaking Krillie had leaned forward and so was nearer to the speaker. 'I can hear voices !'

They listened intently and, sure enough, heard faint and mumbling voices.

Kemlo worked furiously at the receiving dials and the voices became slightly clearer.

'It's Kerowski ! I'll swear it's Kerowski !' he exclaimed. 'I'd recognise his voice anywhere.' The radar screen began to glow as his hands flashed to its controls to try to focus the image more clearly.

'It's a scooter,' he said. 'No mistake about it—there's a scooter near us somewhere.' He raised his voice and called : 'This is Kemlo craft calling nearest scooter. Come in, scooter. Open circuit wavelength. Kemlo craft calling scooter.'

The mumbling in the speaker ceased ; then a muffled voice said : 'Kerowski calling Kemlo. Can't hear you very well but have identified your call.'

Frantically Kemlo trimmed the controls as he

replied : 'Trim your speech fidelity to ultra sharp. Obstruction is blanketing you. Come in, Kerowski.'

There were a few seconds of crackling and muttering before they heard, comparatively clearly, Kartin's voice.

'Kartin here, calling Kemlo. We're through the cloud and are seeing your image clearly on radar screen. You're over six thousand below us. We're falling rapidly.'

'Extend stabilisers, cut to full reverse thrust,' said Kemlo, and gave a number of technical instructions. After what seemed like hours but only lasted moments, Kartin said :

'Instructions received and carried out. We are now falling very gently.'

Kemlo manipulated the controls of the radar screen and soon they saw the blurred outline of Red Flash scooter ; but by this time Krillie was nudging him urgently.

'Wait a minute, Krillie,' he said. 'I've got to get these controls fixed.'

'Look, Kemlo, look !' Krillie insisted.

'I'm still with you, Kartin,' Kemlo called into the speaker. 'Picking up your image fairly clearly now. Hold on while I see what Krillie wants.'

In response to Krillie's pointing hand Kemlo looked up through the canopy where, to the right of them, he saw a strange sight.

## BRIDGE OF COLOUR

Stretching almost from the edge of the substance upon which their scooter rested was a huge arc of coloured light—a bridge-like structure extending through the pearly light to the purple-red star cloud high above them. And as they gazed in amazement at this phenomenon, so they saw, tiny in the distance, the glinting hull of the other scooter.

‘You’re coming through some sort of cosmic rainbow,’ Kemlo called urgently into the speaker. ‘Can you see it?’

‘The light’s quite bright,’ Kartin replied, ‘and we can see substance below us, but no colours other than a pearly-grey with a reddish sheen. We’re three thousand feet from the substance, with strong gravity pull and slight atmospheric readings. Descending slowly. What colours are you talking about, Kemlo?’

‘A bridge of colour stretching from our position over the point where you are now. You’re passing just under it.’

‘Sorry,’ said Kartin. ‘We can’t see it. Might be an optical illusion.’

‘It might be,’ Kemlo agreed. ‘Are you two all right?’

‘After all this time he asks us!’ said Kerowski. ‘But we forgot to ask you the same thing. This is a fine fix we’re in. We’ve lost contact with the patrol!’

‘So have we,’ said Kemlo. ‘But we’re together

now. We'll work something out. Careful how you go ; you're getting closer to the substance. Watch it in case it's hot. You might melt the hull and burn yourselves to a frazzle. Do be careful, Kartin. Can you still hear me ? '

## Chapter 8

### STRANGE FORCES

'CAN we hear him !' Kerowski exclaimed in a disgruntled voice. 'We've got the speech trimmed so finely you're nearly deafening us. Cut it down a bit, Kartin.'

'There's no instrument reading of undue heat, Kemlo,' said Kartin. 'A thousand feet to go. Can you still see us ?'

'We can see you on the screen and through the canopy,' Krillie replied excitedly. 'You're ever so tiny, and that colour makes your scooter look gold.'

'Does it now? Perhaps we *have* turned to gold,' said Kerowski.

'You couldn't,' Krillie declared stoutly, although there was an edge of doubt in his voice, as if he were prepared to believe that anything could happen. 'I've been very frightened,' he added. 'Have you been frightened ?'

'We've been scared stiff, if we told the truth,' Kartin admitted.

'Well, as he's just told you the truth, I suppose it's no use pretending that we weren't,' said Kerowski. 'I was in such a funk that Kartin had to slap me across the face.'



‘Did you, Kartin?’ Krillie’s eyes widened.

‘We-ell—he did get a bit hysterical,’ Kartin replied hesitantly, ‘but I wasn’t far off it myself. I think it was a question of who slapped whom first.’

‘I didn’t get historical,’ said Krillie. ‘Did I, Kemlo?’

‘No, you were very brave, Krillie. We’ve all got to do a lot of thinking about this. I don’t understand it at all. We’ve obviously come through a star cloud, and the substances we’re on and the one you’re heading for are tiny portions of the galaxy.’

‘How do you know they are?’ Kerowski asked.

‘How do you know they’re not?’ Kemlo retorted. ‘Don’t be a dope, Krow. What else could they be?’

‘We’d better stop arguing and concentrate on setting this craft down,’ Kartin interrupted. ‘We’ve only a few hundred feet to go now. Watch those stabilisers, Krow. I’ve got my hands full keeping the pressure up.’

‘Cut your induction as soon as you feel the hull touch something solid,’ Kemlo advised. ‘You’re coming down steadily and you look safe enough, but you’re too far away for me to see properly. Don’t move your controls until you feel the hull bump. Good luck!’

Kemlo leaned away from the speaker, and he and Krillie were silent as they stared through the

canopy at the tiny coloured object—so far away that it was hardly possible to identify as a space scooter.

The bridge of colour seemed brighter than ever and flowed in a broad arc across the grey expanse to disappear just beyond the long dark blur on which the other scooter now was settling.

After anxious moments Kartin's voice came clearly through the speaker. He sounded considerably relieved.

'We're down! The bump jarred us a little and the gravity pressure is pretty strong, but we're not damaged and the instruments seem to be functioning all right.'

'The instruments are functioning all right, but I'm not so sure that I am,' said Kerowski. 'This is a shocking place to land.'

'What does it look like?' Kemlo signalled to Krillie to switch on the recorder so that Kerowski's explanation could be taken direct from the speaker.

'It's a grey-brown colour with a very uneven surface—all cracks and lumps, and some of the lumps look highly polished, but perhaps that's an illusion of the peculiar light.' Kerowski stopped speaking for a moment, then he exclaimed suddenly: 'Hey! I can see that coloured thing now!'

'So can I,' said Kartin. 'We've been so busy checking the instruments and looking around at

scooter level that we haven't looked upward. But there it is—as clear as an Earth rainbow, according to pictures I've seen of them.'

'Yes, it's just like a rainbow, but I'd say it's a lot brighter, and bigger,' said Kemlo. 'It seems to start from just beyond us and continue in a curving arc above your scooter. Can you see where it ends?'

'Some way off,' Kartin replied. 'It sort of fades out and all we can see is that pearly light.'

'Well, what do we do now?' Kerowski asked after a pause.'

'We try to get back, of course,' said Kemlo. 'But it's going to take a lot of power to do it, I'm afraid.'

'Pity we didn't land on your piece of substance,' Kartin observed. 'We're so far away that, except for being able to communicate over the speaker, we're not a lot of help to each other.'

'I'm going to try to reach you,' said Kemlo. 'The substance you've landed on seems to be a lot larger than where we are.'

'What's yours like?'

'About the same as yours in appearance, but I doubt if you could get more than four or five scooters on it. It looks like a flat meteor that's expended itself.'

'Don't be daft!' said Kerowski. 'When a meteor expends itself it just goes into dust.'

'Listen, bighead,' said Kartin, 'not even the

scientists know exactly what happens to a lot of meteors ; there are too many different types of them. Kemlo could be right. It's a substance, and we don't find many substances in space.'

'We come to observe a minor galaxy and finish up with substance,' said Kerowski in an aggrieved voice. 'I'll never believe in the stars again, if this is all they're made of.'

'If we were on a star . . .' Kemlo began, then paused before he added: 'I don't know, Krow ; you may be right. There are many explanations which cover the subject of stars. Some stars are really minor planets, and that means they are a substance. Billions of years ago some of the minor planets were thousands of tiny pieces of matter whirling around in the orbit of their sun. Then slowly they joined up. The surface cooled, and in a few thousand years life in some form or other began to grow.'

'Life !' Kerowski yelled. 'Are you saying that these bits of—of dead-looking substance are alive ?'

Kemlo sighed audibly. 'None of them is actually *alive*, you dope ! Haven't the scientists proved that even Earth might once have been part of a vast gas cloud which swirled through space until it held together by its own inherent gravity ?'

'I ask one small question and I get a lecture,' said Kerowski glumly.

‘It wasn’t meant to be a lecture, Krow,’ Kemlo apologised. ‘Dad says I absorb too much science history and that sort of thing, but it fascinates me. There’s so much we don’t know ; so much we have to guess. Even the scientists are still groping. They said there was no danger in this sky patrol. Everything was to be quite simple. All we had to do was to fly a comfortable outward route, make camera and recording observations of the movements of a minor galaxy, then return home.’ Kemlo almost snorted in disgust. ‘Now we’re stuck on two substances thousands of feet below a star cloud, and can’t even make radio contact with our own patrol ! Great sizzling meteors, Krow, I could do with a lot of lectures right now if they would help work out this problem !’

‘The boy wonder’s right,’ said Kartin with a chuckle. ‘And you’ve got to admit that Kemlo does hold us steady by the way he tries to work things out. A lot of other people, even grown-ups, would panic. We weren’t so far off it ourselves.’

“O, wad some Pow’r the giftie gie us to see oursels as others see us !” ’ Kerowski quoted. He went on to explain the reason for this bursting into the words of Robert Burns by saying : ‘And by that I mean we’re not behaving naturally, just sitting here talking through our speakers while we perch on a star—if it is a star.’

'There's no doubt that it's part of a star,' said Kemlo, 'but what would you call natural in the circumstances, Krow?'

'Ah! There you have me,' Kerowski admitted frankly. 'There's no book of rules to tell us how to react after coming through what we have experienced. I think we're all in a state of shock and that's why we're trying to behave more normally than is reasonable.'

'I'll be honest and admit that I want to keep on talking,' said Kartin. 'If I had to remain silent and look around at this peculiar sort of world we've landed on, I should start yelling for help—which would be crazy because no-one could hear me.' Kartin paused before he added more cheerfully: 'And how's Krillie feeling about all this?'

'I don't know,' Krillie replied. 'I'm all mixed up. First I was frightened; then I thought it was fun; then I was scared again, and then Kemlo made it seem interesting; then I got scared a third time. And now—I don't know how I feel except that I'm getting hungry.'

'After passing through such a gamut of emotions you have a right to feel hungry,' said Kerowski.

'I wish you wouldn't use those sort of words,' Krillie protested. 'What does gamut mean?'

'It's just a word,' said Kartin. 'We've got enough to discuss without Kerowski going into

long explanations of words. It means, roughly, passing through many experiences—I think.'

'And I think it's time for us to get together,' Kemlo suggested, who had been silent while he was thinking out a plan. 'I'm going to try to take off and get across to you. Our power unit has cooled and the propellent has practically re-energised, so I've got maximum power to call on.'

'Well, we've got to get off this and back through the star cloud sometime,' said Kartin. 'You'll be able to see if the gravity pull will let you get clear. We shall know the worst anyway if you can't.'

'Stand by,' said Kemlo. 'I'm going to try it. You sit tight, Krillie, and record what's happening, then we'll have a record of everything I do to get the craft off this substance.'

Krillie nodded seriously and watched Kemlo's actions carefully before he began to speak.

'Kemlo is setting the take-off controls on our space scooter. The power unit is humming and all the instruments are working correctly. The light around us is still pearly-coloured, but it seems to be glowing more and the wide strip of colour is still visible. Very high above us is the purple-red star cloud which seems to have grown bigger.'

Hearing Krillie say this, Kemlo paused in his setting of the controls and glanced upward.

'You're right, Krillie!' he exclaimed. 'It is

growing bigger, and there's a tiny opening in the centre which shows very dark. That *could* be space.' He looked downward through the canopy. 'We're locked in the cloud though. It stretches unbroken below us and so far on either side that it seems only a shadow.'

'Shadow is right,' said Kartin's voice through the speaker. 'The width of this cloud must be thousands and thousands of miles.'

'Well, the depth must be about fifteen thousand,' Kerowski added.

'I'm going to concentrate on take-off,' said Kemlo briskly. 'Are your safety straps tight, Krillie?'

'Yes, Kemlo.'

'Right. Here we go!'

The hull of the scooter bumped once as the nose canted upward. The speaker bellowed a hissing roar as the external microphone picked up the surge of pressure from the lifting tubes. Kemlo flicked off a switch and cut out the external microphone because the noise made their ears sing.

The scooter streaked forward at an angle, but as the distance between the gravity-laden substance and the craft increased, so the upward thrust of the tubes became more powerful and the scooter climbed at a much sharper angle.

The speed was so great that Kemlo's mind was not quick enough to turn the craft before they



were almost into the star cloud and the interior of the scooter became dark as the swirling cloud streamed past the canopy.

Krillie was speaking into the microphone, trying to give his impressions of this action which was too fast to be described. In a few seconds Kemlo had regained control of the scooter and started the long spiral descent before Krillie had half finished explaining the speed of take-off.

Reducing the pressure of the forward thrust, Kemlo ejected the stabilisers and, having once experienced the amount of gravity pull from the substance below them, was able to skim the craft down in graceful circles. By closely following his instruments he could control the scooter's descent until he was hovering in small circles above the other craft.

'A super effort, Kem!' Kartin called, and his voice was so loud through the speaker that the volume nearly deafened Krillie, who reached out and turned down the control. But with his usual rough-handedness he knocked another switch, and as Kemlo began the delicate task of setting the scooter down alongside Red Flash Kartin's voice faded out and a weird jumble of sound emanated from the speaker.

This sound so surprised Kemlo that he nearly shot the scooter nose-on to the substance and a crash was averted only by a last-second effort.

The scarlet scooter landed a few yards from

Red Flash, and as Kemlo cut the induction and neutralised the controls, the speaker jabbered away in a most peculiar fashion and in a language not immediately recognisable.

But it was not Kartin's voice, nor Kerowski's, for they could see the other two boys talking to them through the canopy. Obviously some form of transmission was being picked up—but what could it be?

## Chapter 9

### THE VOICES

‘**I**T was me,’ said Krillie nervously. ‘I knocked that switch when I turned down the volume.’

‘That one?’ Kemlo pointed to a broad finger-shaped switch.

Krillie nodded. ‘I’m sorry, Kemlo. I always do something wrong, don’t I?’

‘You might have done something right this time,’ Kemlo replied with a chuckle. ‘That switch changes the radiotronic impulse frequency to the channel used by the big research ships. We seldom use it because we don’t need to, and it cuts out the channel which links us with Control.’ He increased the volume of the speaker again and the chattering voices became clearer. ‘It sounds like a foreign language to me,’ he declared. ‘Keep the recorder going, Krillie.’ Kemlo reached up and opened the canopy.

‘Where are you going?’ Krillie asked anxiously.

‘Across to the others. We can’t receive or transmit to them while that switch is on. Those voices must be coming from somewhere—perhaps we can trace the source.’

‘Oh, Kemlo! Be careful!’ Krillie urged.

'I will,' Kemlo promised. 'You sit tight until I come back. Don't touch anything.' He eased himself over the side of the scooter, but the gravity made his movements clumsy and he fell awkwardly.

Krillie yelped in fright as his friend disappeared, but his fear changed to relief as Kemlo's head and shoulders slowly reappeared.

'It's all right, Krillie.' Kemlo grinned. 'I'm too heavy. Can't balance myself properly yet. I think I'll have to crawl to the others.' He was panting a little now with the effort of trying to remain upright.

For a few moments he was again lost to sight before he appeared on Krillie's side of the scooter, crawling slowly toward the other craft.

Kerowski and Kartin had opened the canopy of their craft and were anxiously watching Kemlo's progress.

'Is the surface hot, Kem?' Kartin called.

Kemlo lifted his perspiring face, grinned at them and moved his head slowly in a negative gesture.

'He's no breath for talking,' said Kerowski. 'Our holding rays must be saving us from feeling the full effect of the gravity. I'm going over to help him.'

Kerowski levered himself over the side of the scooter, having first pressed the neutraliser switch which caused a gap in the holdings to open and

allow him to pass through it. Kemlo, of course, had done the same thing when he left his own craft. The rays closed automatically behind Kerowski, but immediately he was through them he—as Kemlo had done—promptly fell over.

He lay on the surface some yards from the crawling figure of Kemlo, feeling as if a great weight were holding him down. Then he moved a small neutraliser button on his suit and this generated holding rays around himself. These had a marked effect in decreasing the gravity resistance, and Kerowski was able to rise, somewhat slowly and cumbrously, to his feet. Walking in a stooping position, after the fashion of a man treading through deep snow against a howling gale, he reached Kemlo's side.

'Who's the dope now?' he demanded. 'Why don't you generate your suit's holding rays?'

Kemlo's face was red and he was gasping for breath, but despite this he was able to grin at his own forgetfulness. He re-set the neutraliser button and obtained immediate relief when the rays sprayed out around his body.

'I am a dope,' he agreed breathlessly as he climbed to his feet. 'I forgot all about them. Phew! That crawling was hard going.'

'Why didn't you answer us when you landed?'

'I'll tell you when we reach your craft.' Kemlo straightened his body with the action of a man rising upright when bearing a load across



GORDON

Kemlo lifted his perspiring face,

his shoulders. He gazed in each direction, turning slowly to survey the whole area.

The substance on which they stood was a reddish-brown colour although the pearly light had made it appear grey when seen from above. It was seamed with cracks and looked flat as it stretched away into the distance. But closer inspection showed it to be composed of little hollows and bumps, and a few raised parts which, although of the same substance and colour, had a spongy texture. Parts of the surface where the cracks widened into narrow fissures were also sponge-like in appearance. The hollows were rough-looking and bore a rippled pattern, but this faded out on the higher sections, which had a smooth polished look.

It was like standing on a cloud, Kemlo thought. A cloud which spread to the infinite distance until all the reddish-brown surface merged into the pearly light and became one with it. Although not warm in degrees of actual heat, the surface did not strike icy-cold; a fact which Kerowski observed with interest.

‘You know, Kem,’ he said thoughtfully, ‘this *could* be a giant meteor that’s been trapped in the orbit of a galaxy and cooled off.’

‘It does make you wonder,’ Kemlo agreed, pressing on the surface with his feet. ‘It looks like rock, but it isn’t as hard. In fact, you can leave faint imprints on the surface—look!’ He

## THE VOICES

moved a few paces to show the marks where he had pressed his feet.

'The marks are filling out again,' Kerowski said, and moved to where a large crack ran its zig-zag course. He stooped slowly and fumbled at the jagged edge.

'Be careful you don't cut your hand,' Kemlo warned. 'We don't know what this substance is; it could be poisonous. Any space man will tell you that if you land on a strange planet, the greatest danger is breaking your skin on any object.'

Kerowski grunted as he straightened up again.

'It's not hard to break off.' He held out several pieces in one hand, then suddenly yelped and dropped them. 'Yeow! They're alive!'

'Don't be crazy—how can they be?' Kemlo knelt swiftly—an easy thing to do in this unaccustomed gravity force. He scooped up the pieces Kerowski had dropped and struggled upright, holding them in his open hand.

Both boys stared at them for a few moments.

'See?' Kerowski whispered. 'They move!'

'Yes, you're right,' Kemlo agreed, watching the small pieces of reddish-brown substance move in worm-like actions in the palm of his hand. It was only a tiny movement; a contracting and expanding action.

'Some form of micro-organism, or else a similar thing to what happens to plastic or rubber when



you pull off a chunk of it,' said Kemlo thoughtfully. 'Except that those only move one way.'

'But those only contract,' said Kerowski. 'This stuff is contracting and expanding—like some tiny creatures breathing.'

'They can't possibly be tiny creatures,' said Kemlo sharply.

'But you said micro-organism yourself.'

'What does micro mean?' Kemlo answered his own question. 'Generally something too small to be seen by the naked eye; sometimes even too small to be seen with an ordinary microscope. But they cause life just the same, or rather they *are* life of some sort.'

'Brrr!' Kerowski shivered. 'If this whole place is alive, the faster we get out of here the better!'

'Don't panic. We'll go over to your scooter and put these in one of the specimen boxes,' Kemlo suggested. 'I've often wondered why we carry them, but they're just the thing for keeping something like this.'

'Yes, and we can seal this stuff in one of the boxes, then watch it through the little window,' said Kerowski. 'It's much better than holding it.'

'I don't see how it can hurt you,' said Kemlo as they went toward the scooter. He held his hand very steadily, cupping it slightly but not closing it over the pieces of substance.

## THE VOICES

Kerowski peered over Kemlo's shoulder. 'Are they still moving?' he asked.

'Yes.'

They reached the circle of holding rays around the Red Flash scooter. Kartin, who was leaning over the side to help them in, had neutralised the rays, leaving a gap for the two boys to crawl through.

'Get a specimen box, Kartin,' said Kemlo when they were inside the scooter. 'We've got something here to put in it.'

When the pieces of substance had been safely stowed away in the specimen box and its top sealed, the boys peered through the transparent plastic window and watched them curling then straightening in a seemingly endless motion.

'What is it?' Kartin asked. 'What makes it move like that?'

'This substance must be moving slightly all the time,' said Kemlo. 'But the movement is so small that we don't feel it. Did the instruments pick up anything?'

'There's a shade of movement on the magnetic meter,' Kartin replied, looking at the control-panel. 'But it's so faint that it's hardly recording anything.'

'I think Krillie's getting lonely,' said Kerowski, who had been waving to the boy in the other scooter.

Kemlo turned and saw Krillie's head and

shoulders above the side of his craft, with one arm raised and waving to them.

‘I’d better get back soon or he’ll be frightened,’ said Kemlo. He went on quickly to explain about the strange voices coming through the speaker.

Kartin knocked on the switch that Krillie had accidentally touched, and at once their own speaker was filled with the soft babbling voices.

‘But where is it coming from?’ said Kartin. ‘We haven’t had a signal from the patrol or from the Belt since we came through that star cloud.’

‘That’s one of the reasons why I couldn’t explain it to you,’ Kemlo replied.

‘You could have used your portable,’ Kerowski suggested.

‘How could I use the portable?’ Kemlo asked irritably. ‘A portable has to be linked with your main instrument for it to receive and transmit. But we could keep yours tuned to your portable, then all of us go back to my scooter. If we take your portable with us, we shall have two sets to work on.’

‘That’s sense,’ Kartin agreed, grinning at Kerowski. ‘Something which Krow doesn’t use very often.’

‘And pish-pash to you too!’ Kerowski retorted.

‘Pass your portable to me, Kartin, and link up your main instrument at full power so that we

can get the maximum use from it,' Kemlo advised. 'Better bring some food and drink as well. There's more room in our scooter and we shan't be too cramped.'

'I don't mind if we are,' said Kerowski frankly. 'The closer we are together, the better I shall like it. This place gives me the creeps. What with pearly light and brilliant rainbows and a crawling substance, and now babbling voices—I'm beginning to wish I were back in my cubicle reading Shakespeare. The Bard had a word for everything.' Kerowski laughed mirthlessly. 'I wonder what word he would have used for this situation?'

'Take the specimen box and stop yattering about your precious bard,' Kartin retorted, thrusting the box at his friend.

Krillie was very relieved when finally the three boys reached the scooter and, after climbing in, adjusted the rear compartment so that Kartin and Kerowski could be more comfortable.

'They're still chattering away.' Krillie pointed to the speaker. 'I've been scared on my own. I wondered what would happen if you never got back.'

'Are you still hungry?' Kemlo ruffled the younger boy's hair.

'I wasn't, while you were away, but I am now.'

'Then let's eat and drink and decide what to do about these voices,' said Kemlo. 'Now we

have the portable linked to Red Flash's instrument we might be able to get a reading on where they're coming from.'

They relaxed over a meal, and, at the same time, Kemlo set the portable instrument. Taking readings from his own instrument's reception dial he began to link up frequencies and radiotronic wavelengths until he had some degree of balance between the two instruments. Then he cut the switch on the portable and finished his meal in silence.

'Well, master-mind?' said Kerowski after a long pause. 'What now?'

'Those voices keep stopping, as if people were relaying messages and waiting for the answers,' said Kemlo thoughtfully.

'Ah, brilliant!' Kerowski exclaimed. 'Except that they're speaking in a language I don't understand, your observation is a trifle too obvious.'

'That being so,' Kemlo continued, ignoring the sarcasm, 'we must get some reaction if we transmit on the same frequency.'

'How can you do that, if you don't know it?' Krillie asked.

'I've got the instrument down to a rough reading and, as far as I can make out, the sounds are coming from somewhere within three thousand miles of us.'

His words made them look up through the canopy and gaze anxiously in all directions.

'You won't be able to see anything at that distance, you dopes,' said Kemlo derisively. 'They might be above us, below us—anywhere.'

'I don't see how they can be below us,' said Kartin. 'This is solid for the rest of the distance, according to our gravity meter.'

'You mean to the other extremity of the star cloud?'

Kartin nodded. 'That makes sense, doesn't it, Kem?'

'Yes, it makes sense,' Kemlo agreed. 'Which means they must be on a level with us and resting on the substance, or about three thousand miles above us. We wouldn't necessarily see them; and they certainly wouldn't see us although their instruments might have picked up our flight impulse.'

'We create very small impulses in these space scooters,' said Kerowski, suddenly serious and trying to be helpful. 'Perhaps they wouldn't pick us up?'

'I shouldn't like to rely on that,' said Kemlo. 'Even our radar screens will pick up the tiniest electronic ray.'

'Then why haven't we picked up them?' said Krillie brightly.

'That's a good point,' Kemlo replied with a grin. 'I don't know the answer, but I've got an idea.' He turned to Kerowski and said: 'If you listen carefully to those voices as they stop and

start, you can sense the differences in tone, although reception is poor and it's a language we don't understand. Do you think you could imitate them?'

'I think so,' Kerowski nodded slowly. 'Yes, Kem—I think I could.'

'Come close to the portable and speak into the pad in a fairly low voice. Say any sort of gibberish you like, then stop, and we'll see if we can tell by the voices in the other speaker whether they've been interrupted by hearing you.'

'And if they have?' Kartin asked.

'Well, it seems sense to me that they'll be silent for perhaps a second or two before they start asking each other who's talking.'

'Brainy,' said Kerowski. 'Very brainy. Let me get at that speaker pad.'

'Now take it easy,' Kemlo warned him. 'Don't go giggling or anything.'

'I am not given to giggling,' said Kerowski haughtily. 'Are you ready with that switch?'

'All ready.' Kemlo flicked the switch and put his fingers to his lips to caution Krillie and Kartin to be quiet.

Kerowski leaned close to the speaker and began:

'Ichbod amsay caravencha kemloma kidera spoffs are plasticmembrane. . . .'

The words sounded so funny and Kerowski spoke them so seriously that Krillie had to clap his hands over his mouth to stop himself from

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laughing outright. Kartin obviously was holding himself in, and even Kemlo, who appreciated the seriousness of what they were trying to do, couldn't help grinning broadly.

Kerowski's words were nonsense, but he had, with uncanny skill, caught the same inflection as that of the foreign-sounding voices. He stopped speaking when Kemlo raised his hand, then reached forward and knocked off the transmitting switch.

'Quiet now!' Kemlo urged, cutting across Krillie's laughter and Kartin's chuckles. He pointed to the speaker. 'They've stopped! Listen!'

The speaker was silent for a second or two, then a voice babbled something quickly in a tone which held a questioning note.

Another pause before the speaker babbled again. This voice sounded slightly different in pitch, but it also held a questioning note.

'We'll wait a few moments for them to speak again before you have another go, Krow,' said Kemlo. 'By then I should be able to get a fixed beam on to a more correct reading. Are you ready?'

'Ready,' Kerowski replied, licking his lips and preparing to repeat his mumbo-jumbo of non-sensical words.

'Now!' Kemlo exclaimed, and clicked the switch.



Kerowski, now thoroughly enjoying this role of official reciter of nonsense, gave forth with a string of the most inane gibberish any of them had heard. In fact he played his part so well that Krillie had to take his hands away from his mouth and burst out laughing or he would have choked.

Immediately the laughter sprang from Krillie's throat Kemlo switched off the speaker and began to make adjustments to the various dials.

Again the speaker emitted those questioning tones, which were followed by a more deliberate voice.

'I don't understand a word they're saying,' said Kemlo, 'but I wouldn't mind betting they're doing the same as we are.'

'You mean, they're taking a fix on us?' Kartin asked anxiously.

'Why not?' Kemlo shrugged. 'Two can play at this game.'

'Have you found where they are, Kemlo?' Krillie asked, wiping his eyes because he had laughed so much that he was almost crying.

'I've got a better idea than I had before,' Kemlo replied. 'I think they're about two thousand six hundred off on a tangent beam of forty degrees. It's very rough casting, but I'm sure that's where it's coming from, and by the sound of that last voice, they've got our fix too.'

## THE VOICES

'I'll say they have,' said Kartin grimly, pointing to the canopy. 'Look at that!'

An object like a giant wheel of orange light was spinning across the backdrop of the dark star cloud.

## *Chapter 10*

### S O S !

‘**T**HAT’S torn it !’ said Kartin. ‘Now we’re properly caught !’

‘Let’s keep calm,’ said Kemlo with a confidence he didn’t feel. ‘We’ve no enemies in space.’

‘You hope !’ Kerowski muttered. ‘What is it anyway ?’

‘A ship of some sort ; a circular craft with rocket exhausts, by the look of it.’

‘Rocket exhausts !’ Kartin exclaimed disbelievingly. ‘You only have rocket exhausts on moon-based ships. Our people haven’t used rocket exhausts for years.’

‘Start your diary recording, Krillie,’ Kemlo ordered. ‘Kartin, help me try to reach our patrol or the Belt by linking up the power of both sets. Hurry now ! I’ll call out readings for you to synchronise.’

Urgency and a hint of fear sped their hands, and soon the two instruments were linked to open circuit with double power output.

‘Kemlo craft calling sky patrol. Kemlo craft calling Satellite K Control.’ Kemlo spoke urgently. ‘Beaming S O S ! Kemlo craft beam-

s o s !

ing S O S ! We are on substance about six thousand feet in centre of star cloud. A strange object is approaching us. A circular craft spouting orange flames. It is manned by something or someone using a foreign language. We have heard their voices. Kemlo craft beaming S O S ! Come in, please. Over and out.'

The following silence pressed upon them. They gazed anxiously at the large circular craft spinning ever nearer to them. Suddenly Krillie yelled :

'It's gone ! The big rainbow's gone !'

His last words were drowned in a blare of power from the speaker.

'Satellite K Control calling Kemlo craft. Your message received. All resources are alerted to rescue you. Keep open circuit. Don't panic. Are you——'

As abruptly as it had started the voice stopped—cut off in mid-sentence.

Kerowski and Krillie had been watching the area above the scooter as Control's message came through and Kerowski now observed grimly : '*That's* the cause of our radiotronic obstruction, Kem.' He pointed upward.

'I thought you said it had gone?' Kemlo asked Krillie.

'So it had—now it's back again ! But it did go, Kemlo ; honest it did !'

'It disappeared right enough,' Kerow' con-

firmed. 'But as soon as it reappeared it cut out reception from Control.'

'It looks very pretty,' said Kartin, 'but it's something more than an illusion. Those colours are man-made.'

'Man-made?' Kemlo queried, pointing to the spinning craft which was skimming lower and lower. 'Let's hope there are *men* in that thing. If so, they're very clever, because even our engineers haven't devised anything quite so efficient as that rainbow for cutting out radio-tronic waves.'

'What if they're not men?' Krillie asked in a quivering voice. 'S'pose they're—*things*!'

Kerowski wrapped a long and comforting arm around the younger boy's shoulders.

'You've been reading too many of those Earth science-fiction comics,' he declared firmly. 'If they are not men, they must be machines.'

'You mean robots?' Krillie sniffed and blinked tears from his eyes.

Kerowski looked doubtful.

'But machines *are* robots,' Krillie insisted. 'Aren't they, Kemlo?'

'Well, any instrument or machine which does anything on its own is a robot of a sort. Electronic brains are robots. Automatic pilots are robots. But they can't hurt you.'

'What about the UVAC master-brain which can launch a fleet of space ships, control them

s o s !

during flight, bring them back to Earth base and then type out its own report?' Kartin spoke quickly and a little breathlessly. 'That "thing" can do everything except blow its nose, and no doubt it could do that, if it had one.'

'It only does what the engineers tell it to do,' Kemlo pointed out. 'They feed in special code instructions on a tape recording and the master-brain carries them out. But without orders from a human being it can't work.'

'I hope you're right,' said Kartin grimly.

'It's not a question of my being right,' Kemlo retorted irritably. 'You know as well as I do how UVAC works. There's nothing supernatural about an electronic brain. It's useless without men on Earth, or on any of the Satellite Belts, to control it.'

There was a brief silence while they watched the strange craft settling nearer and nearer to the surface, knowing that they were powerless to do anything but watch.

Its appearance had been sudden, and from the moment it had come into sight there had been no opportunity for Kartin and Kerowski to return to their own craft, nor to attempt a take-off. The scooters could not climb from gravity by any means other than an incline flight. In space, where no gravity pull prevented such manoeuvres, these small and easily controlled craft could climb almost vertically. But then,

space allowed many manoeuvres of men and machines which the presence of any gravity force rendered impossible.

But even if they had been quick enough to get the scooters off the substance, they could not have avoided a collision with the spinning machine descending in circles. It was doubtful if these reasons had occurred to Krillie, but they were so obvious to the three older boys that none of them had bothered to mention the fact.

In Kemlo's mind was a fear that this spinning flame-spouting craft would descend on top of the scooter and he glanced anxiously at the meter which registered the strength of the holding rays. He thought that if this craft did descend upon them it would be a big test of that strength. Like all people who lived in space, Kemlo knew that but for the invention of these rays many space craft and their occupants would be destroyed by the hurtling forces which, in a flash of a second, streaked across the void. On several occasions he had experienced the protection of this magnificent invention and knew the colossal strength of the rays.

The generating equipment for projecting the holding rays around a person was no bigger than an old-fashioned matchbox, and these personal rays were invisible because a larger item of equipment was necessary to provide the faintly opalescent colouring such as was fed into the rays

s o s !

around all space craft. The tiny neutraliser button, fixed to the lapel of his suit, together with a small generator, were items of equipment no man or boy in space would dream of omitting from his clothing.

This neutraliser carried on a person made a hole, or doorway, through the invisible shield around that person, and so allowed an object to be brought close to his body or another person's arms to enter the shield and adjust some item of equipment.

When walking in space, the holding rays flowed all around the body at a distance of four feet, enveloping a man or boy in an invisible cage of protection. But on a substance the rays were neutralised at ankle height by the automatic action of the button which had a long technical name, but was so often called just 'button' that it came to be known by that term.

The holding rays surrounding Kemlo's craft and the other scooter, some twelve feet distant around the hulls, looked like a whitish transparent balloon. Kemlo looked across at the Red Flash scooter to assure himself that the rays were visible, for in this peculiar light it was not easy to discern the holding-ray shield around his own craft. With relief he saw that Red Flash's rays were functioning at full power.

These thoughts on the relative strength and function of the holding rays had filled Kemlo's



mind during the past tense moments ; not because he was doing any day-dreaming but for the very real and vital reason that the rays were the only protection he and his friends had against attack. In the absence of any other defence against a large object of attack, Kemlo felt reasonably sure that the rays would protect them. Similar thoughts occupied the minds of Kerowski and Kartin, but Krillie was not old enough to appreciate these technical points of a possible defence.

Krillie alternated between a sick and fluttery feeling in his tummy and a rather fearful sense of excitement which made his heart bump loudly in his chest. Not wanting to betray his feelings or let his friends know that he couldn't be as calm as they were, he remained silent ;, but as all the boys were silent, mainly for this reason, each unknowingly gave confidence to the others.

Many words as well as a host of fast-moving thoughts can fill very few moments of time ; and to the watching and waiting boys it seemed much longer than it really was since they had first seen the hurtling spinning object. They watched the orange glow deepen, then start to fade as the circular craft spun on its last revolutions and settled in a gentle rocking action on the surface of the substance.

Now that the object had ceased spinning and the orange flames had died away, leaving the

exhaust sockets glowing red but slowly cooling to a metallic grey colour, they saw more clearly its exact shape.

It was like a huge ball which had been squashed as if by a giant's hand, for the centre line was the largest point of its circumference. Above and below this, the hull or cover of the craft was ridged in circles of gradually decreasing circumference until they reached the top and the base, where the squashed-in effect was even more marked.

As it rested steadily on its base it was impossible to see whether some form of bracing supports ran from under it, or if this base was the same size as the top.

The craft was bronze in colour, smooth but not particularly shiny, and the pearly light glinted from parts of its ridged contours. All around the centre and widest sections were ribbed slots. From these slots, raised lines appeared to run up to the top and down to the base.

Glad of some action, Kemlo grabbed the binoculars and, after passing one pair to Kartin, lifted the others and focused them on the craft.

'See those lines running up and down from the centre above and below the slots?' he whispered. He didn't know why he needed to whisper, but it was probably the tension because Kartin replied in the same low voice.

'They look like ridges, but when you get the

glasses on them you can see that they are tiny antennae.'

'They must be the eyes and ears of the craft,' said Kemlo. 'I can't see any portholes or other slots.'

'What are the round things on top?' Kerowski asked. 'They look like little studs all around the top edge.'

'I must be dreaming,' said Kartin. 'Those little knob things are moving!'

'Yes, they're moving,' Kemlo agreed. 'The centre of each one keeps pulsing in and out.'

'They might be breathers,' Kerowski suggested.

'I'm not saying much,' Krillie piped up in a shrill and rather frightened voice, 'because Kemlo and Kartin, who are looking through their binoculars at the funny thing that's landed near us, are describing it without my having to.'

The sound of Krillie's voice startled both Kemlo and Kartin. They lowered their binoculars and glared at him; then Kemlo grinned.

'That's a good lad,' he said encouragingly. 'Keep the recorder going so that we catch the impression of everything as it happens.'

'When what happens?' Kerowski demanded. 'Let me take a look through those glasses.'

'All right,' said Kartin. 'Don't snatch!'

But Kerowski was too busy focusing the binoculars to apologise.

'Hey! Can you see what I see, Kemlo? There's a movement near the base of the hull!'

'Where?'

'Slightly off our direct angle of sight; more to the left in line with our scooter's hull.'

'I can see it!' Krillie exclaimed. 'Oh! It's like a mouth opening!'

'Sliding doors,' said Kemlo. 'You can see them clearly. I wonder what's coming out?'

'You're not wondering any more than I am,' said Kartin.

'A ramp's being lowered!' Kerowski exclaimed. 'A shallow ramp, extending very slowly. It's touching the surface now.'

'Nothing has appeared in the opening yet,' said Kemlo.

'I wish we'd brought our glasses,' said Kartin. 'I can't see as clearly as you can.'

'Here, take them.' Kerowski thrust the binoculars toward his friend. 'If something doesn't come through that opening pretty soon I shall scream!'

'I'll join you,' said Kartin, 'then Kemlo can slap us both. Come *on*!' he muttered. 'Whatever you are—hurry up!'

'Something moved!' Kemlo exclaimed. 'Something is coming out!'

'Ooh, I'm scared!' Krillie cried, and put his hands over his eyes.

## Chapter II

### THE HUMPTIES

‘DON’T be afraid, Krillie,’ said Kerowski.  
‘I’m not.’

‘You are,’ said Krillie in a muffled voice.  
‘You sound all trembly.’

‘That’s not fear.’ Kerowski reached out and patted Krillie’s shoulder. ‘That’s because I’m a big soft coward. And anyway, there’s nothing horrible coming out of that craft. I find it very interesting. You ought to watch.’

Krillie slowly removed his hands from his eyes, raised his head and looked through the canopy.

‘Wh-what is it?’ he stammered.

‘It looks like a cross between an Easter egg and an Earth-boy’s globe of his world,’ Kartin replied.

‘It’s more like a giant gyroscope,’ said Kemlo. ‘It’s moving down the ramp now; and there’s another one appeared in the opening! Here it comes, trundling down after the first one!’

‘Ooh—look!’ Krillie yelled. ‘They’re swaying about as if they’re having an argument!’

Kemlo lowered the binoculars and gazed sternly at Kartin and Kerowski.

‘Listen to me—all of you,’ he began seriously.

'I don't know what that craft is, nor where it comes from. I don't know what those gyroscope things are going to try, but I do know that we are not up against anything supernatural. I'm as scared as any of you, so I'm not trying to be a blinking hero, but we've *got* to be sensible.'

'How sensible?' Kartin asked quietly.

'Sensible enough not to imagine things that aren't there.' Kemlo passed the binoculars to Krillie. 'Take a look through these, old son. You'll see that it's nothing more than some sort of mechanical apparatus.'

Krillie did as requested, but when he returned the binoculars to Kemlo he didn't appear to be very impressed.

'They look like egg-men with red eyes,' he announced.

Kemlo made a noise that sounded like an impatient snort as again he viewed the objects through the binoculars.

'Red eyes!' he exclaimed disgustedly. 'They're warning lights of some sort. You know what I think?'

'I am agog to hear,' said Kerowski. 'For the moment, thinking is beyond me. I can only boggle at the sight of those humpty-dumpty mechanical eggs.'

'I think they are sort of portable UVACs sent out to investigate. You can see inset panels of switches for manual control below those red lights.'

And they fairly bristle with antennae. In fact, several antennae are waving about—like feelers.'

The two objects were moving slowly toward the scooter, veering slightly on their course. As they turned, the watching boys could see more of their egg-shaped hulls.

'They've got a mouth too.' Krillie's voice was stubborn and faintly resentful.

'No, Krillie,' said Kartin firmly, 'it's not a mouth. It's a sort of grille similar to those around the centre of the craft—if you can call it a craft,' he added doubtfully.

'It's a craft of some kind.' Kemlo reached for the camera and, setting it carefully so that it held steady, began to photograph the scene. At the same time he gave a commentary for the benefit of the recorder which was still switched on.

'The objects now approaching our scooter are egg-shaped; about five feet high and perhaps three feet in diameter at the widest parts. They are bronze, with two red lights which started to flash as soon as they left the craft. Around the shell of the egg-shaped hull are two circular strips. These strips are at least a foot away from the hull and pass through a sort of slide fixed to a bracket top and bottom of the shell. The strips provide the driving power and also seem to steer and balance the objects.'

'Call 'em humpties,' Kerowski suggested.

Kemlo laughed softly, and continued: 'We

have now christened them humpties. The camera record will show them, but I'm explaining what we can see, and recording it now will save having to make special reports later. The strips must be very effective because the humpties are now travelling fairly fast. Yet despite the uneven surface they remain perfectly rigid under the control of the spinning strips. I keep looking at the craft, but I can't see any movement. But somebody or something must be controlling these humpties.'

'Something that knows we're here,' Kartin added. 'There's no hesitation about these humpties. They'll soon be up against our holding rays.'

'What will happen when they bounce off them?' Krillie's voice showed more excitement and less fear.

'What will happen if they *don't* bounce off?' Kerowski pessimistically amended.

'They'll bounce,' said Kemlo confidently. 'Keep still now. I want a good camera record of what happens when they meet the rays.'

Tensely the boys watched the two trundling humpties approach the protective shield of the holding rays. 'Humpties' was a good name for these peculiar objects, and Krillie had been partly right to declare that they had eyes and a mouth. At a quick glance the two winking red lights, the oblong pattern of grilles, and the



waving tendrils of the antennae did give the impression of some fiendish, glaring-eyed, steely-mouthed and almost bald 'being' from another world.

But closer and more reasonable inspection proved that the first impression was obviously an illusion. The humpties were highly efficient remote-control machines. Kemlo's previous mention of UVAC was a good point. Machines without man's guidance could not think for themselves, but there was danger in such machines because they would not turn away from any objective unless the remote control ordered them so to do. All robots had the same weakness, which at times could be a strength.

UVAC—Earth's famous robot brain whose real name was UNIVERSAL VARIANCE ACCOUNTING CONTROL—could be guided to act accordingly when faced with different circumstances. For instance, when controlling a space ship in flight, if anything went wrong inside the ship, UVAC automatically neutralised the controls and set up a loud warning buzzing. If danger threatened it from outside, then UVAC could change the course of the ship. But faults in the ship and dangers outside it had to be determined by the engineers and pre-recorded on UVAC's instruction tape. If the ship met a danger not listed in UVAC's brain, then the robot could not act in respect of it.

The vital point now was whether these humpties were so tuned to their robot control that they could deal with the unexpected. As neither the craft nor the humpties belonged to Earth, Kemlo and his friends were unable even to guess at the efficiency of these particular machines. It occurred to Kemlo that he was assuming this unidentifiable craft was not from Earth, but if it were some new machine still on the secret list, only a few top scientists would have knowledge of it.

They all were staring, fascinated, at the approaching humpties, although Kemlo did force his gaze away for a moment to survey the area around the scooter. The brilliant coloured arc still curved above them. The pearly light was still growing brighter, and there was no sign of any other craft.

The speaker was dumb now—no murmuring voices, nor even the normal hum of the open circuit. Kemlo startled his friends by moving suddenly to check the radiotronic instruments again. But as these were still blocked he gave up and concentrated on watching the progress of the humpties.

‘They’re separating!’ Kartin exclaimed. ‘One is slowing up while the other—where is it going?’

This humpty had travelled a few yards and now was pivoting first one way then another, as if uncertain which direction to take. Then

finally it trundled off and came around to the other side of the scooter.

‘They must have received some signal to approach each side of our craft,’ said Kemlo. ‘The one on my side is evidently waiting until the other gets into position.’

‘How do they know the position?’ Kerowski asked.

‘Electronic guidance waves, I expect,’ Kemlo replied. ‘They probably are tuned to approach an object together.’

‘Well, it’s not a hard job to synchronise two robots.’ Kartin tensed in his seat as he added: ‘Here they come!’

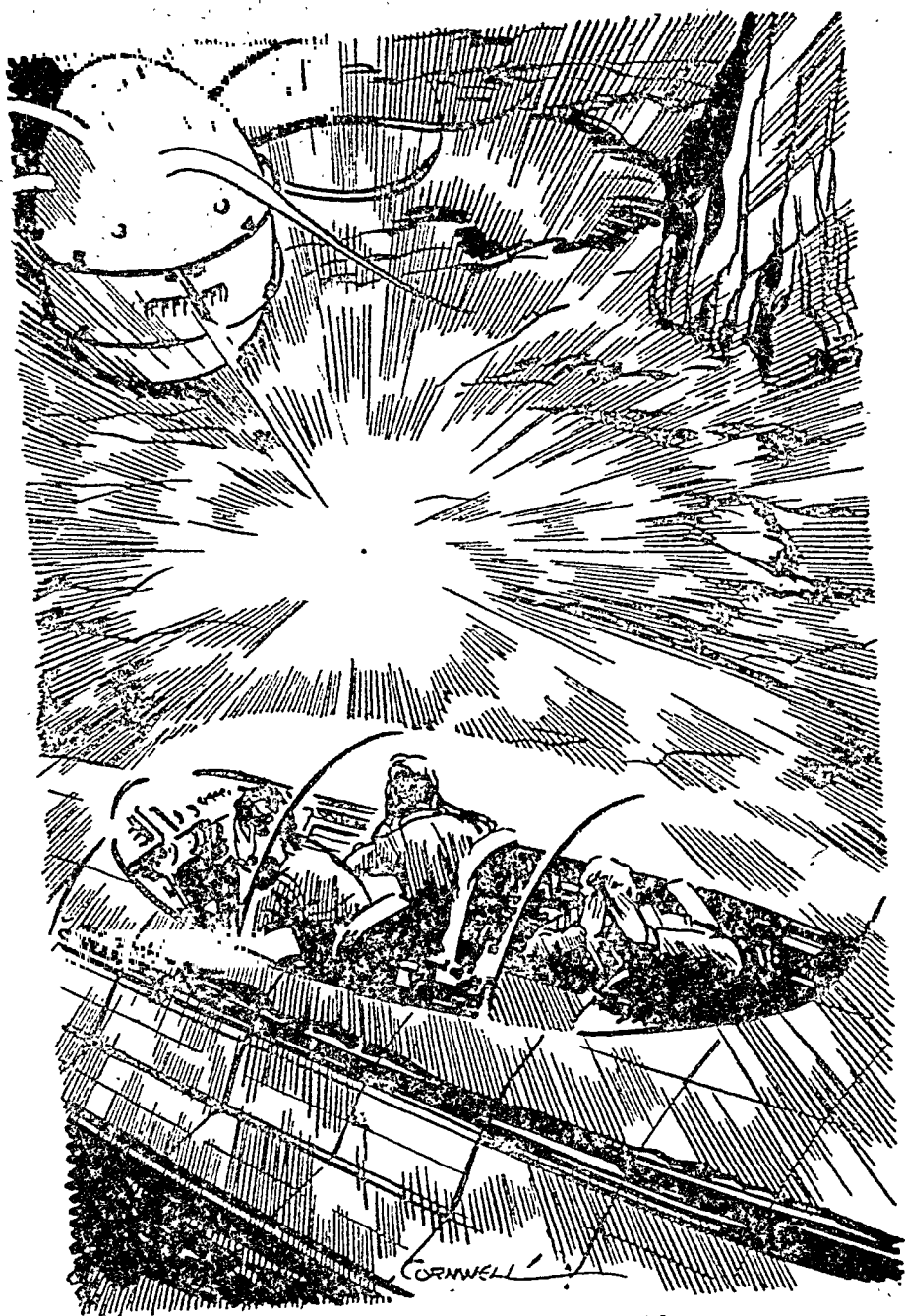
Both humpties struck the shield of holding rays at the same time. After they hit the rays they were immediately halted.

‘I bet that surprised them!’ said Kerowski grimly. ‘Look at them shivering!’

‘The hulls aren’t shivering,’ said Kemlo. ‘It’s the metal strips which drive them. They’re spinning around, but can’t move forward past the rays. The pressure is making them jump on the surface.’

‘It does give a funny impression,’ said Kartin. ‘They look as if they’re shaking with rage.’

‘The strips on the one this side are slowing now,’ said Kemlo, ‘and the hull is turning slowly. What’s the one on your side doing, Krillie?’



‘Cover your eyes quickly!’

‘The egg thing is turning too, and there’s a slot opening—like a shutter.’

‘They must be synchronised,’ said Kemlo. ‘I can see a shutter opening on this one too.’ Then he yelled loudly: ‘Cover your eyes quickly!’

Their reactions were a little slow, but fortunately they all had their hands near to their eyes and were able to form a partial shield against the blinding glare which followed Kemlo’s words. The roar of sound must have been very loud because the muttering grumble of the explosion penetrated the thick canopy of the scooter. It was a good thing that the speaker system was neutralised, otherwise the external microphone would have relayed the sound through the scooter’s amplifiers with terrific force.

Keeping one hand pressed over his eyes, Kemlo groped for the visors and quickly fitted one on.

‘Keep your eyes covered,’ he warned. ‘I’m wearing a visor and I’m going to have a look.’

‘That was some light!’ Kerowski exclaimed ‘What happened?’

‘Guns, I think,’ Kemlo replied grimly. ‘I just saw the nozzles protruding through that shutter a second before I yelled. I’m spreading my fingers over the visor now to test whether I can stand the glare even with it on.’

‘Be careful, Kemlo.’ Krillie’s voice sounded older, as if, on a sudden, danger had given him new

strength. 'It must be awfully bright because I can see flashes behind my hands.'

'I'll be careful, Krillie ; but keep your eyes tightly closed.' Kemlo hesitated a moment before he announced : 'The charges they are exploding against the rays have bounced off and sprayed all over them. It's like a big rocket display. It starts with a greenish-white explosion flash, then bursts into thousands of long red sparks. There's no smoke. I'm turning to look at the humpty on the other side.'

The boys waited, listening intently, as Kemlo swivelled in his seat.

'Yes, there's the same sort of effect from the other one. Don't risk uncovering your eyes yet because the glare is pretty fierce. I'm still keeping one hand over the visor and spreading my fingers every few seconds. Even with that protection it's making my eyes ache. The firing isn't so intense now.' He swivelled again in the seat. 'It's dying down. That's the whole weakness of robots. If a man had fired a charge against the rays and it had no effect, he would have saved his fire ; but these things just released all their charges, and I should think the magazine's empty now.' Then he chuckled.

'Don't sit there cackling while we have to stay with our hands over our eyes,' said Kerowski in a disgruntled voice. 'I feel like a cross-eyed monkey already.'

‘You can take your hands away now,’ said Kemlo, the laughter still in his voice. ‘But do it slowly so that you don’t get too much impact of light.’

The other boys peered eagerly through the canopy at the two humpties.

‘What was so funny?’ Kerowski asked.

‘That one.’ Kemlo pointed to the humpty on his side of the scooter. ‘It’s taken a fearful bashing from its own rays, or whatever it was they fired. They’ve blistered its hull and melted most of the antennae. The red lights have gone out too.’

‘The red lights are still on in the one this side,’ said Krillie, ‘but the hull looks scorched.’

‘Phew!’ Kartin exclaimed. ‘It’s getting hot, isn’t it?’

‘That will be the explosive charges they fired,’ Kemlo explained. ‘The heat waves are seeping through the holding rays.’

Just then the speaker crackled with a faint rush of sound. All the boys froze to stillness in their seats. The crackling went on, but was too faint to identify as voices. Kemlo glanced up through the canopy.

‘That rainbow thing is still there, but it’s not so clear now.’ He clenched his fists and hammered gently on the side of the control seat. ‘I wonder?’ he muttered. ‘I wonder?’

‘You’re not the only one who’s wondering,’ said Kerowski. ‘I’m full of it.’

## THE HUMPTIES

‘One of these humpties is out of action,’ Kemlo observed, speaking slowly. ‘It’s destroyed itself. See that largest antennae—or rather two of them on the top of it? They were waving like feelers, but now they’re just limp and one of them looks as if it’s broken off. I should say that humpty is dead.’ He swivelled in his seat to face the other side of the scooter. ‘The waving antennae on the other one are still working pretty hard.’

‘I can see them,’ Krillie piped. ‘The red eyes keep winking in and out and the hull keeps turning, and the shutter keeps opening, but it hasn’t got any more things to fire, has it?’

‘You’re right, Krillie,’ Kartin agreed. ‘That humpty is still trying to get through the holding rays. It hasn’t got any sense of its own, and now its defensive or attacking charges have been fired, it doesn’t know what to do.’

‘Why should that coloured arc grow fainter at the same time as one of the humpties was put out of action?’ Kemlo asked. ‘I think it’s because the arc is generated from that craft through a circuit in the robots.’ He grinned. ‘Or rather, the humpties, as we’ve called them.’

‘A logical piece of reasoning,’ Kerowski observed. ‘But just how far does that get us?’

‘As far as that up to now,’ Kemlo replied, pointing to the still crackling speaker. ‘Someone is trying to get through and we’re getting a



partial reception. The coloured arc is some sort of neutraliser that cuts out all communications. Whether or not it's intended to do that I wouldn't like to guess at, but that's the effect it has on our radiotronic instruments.'

'But even though one humpty is out of action, there's still the other one trying to get in,' Kartin insisted.

'And if it keeps trying long enough, perhaps whoever controls it will receive messages from its instruments and start some other form of attack,' said Kemlo. 'These humpties on their own are powerless to cope with anything outside their instructions. So'—he drew a deep breath—'if we release a gap in our holding rays and I aim our ray gun carefully and destroy those waving antennae——'

'Jumping Jupiter!' Kerowski exclaimed. 'You'd be taking a chance!'

'Not too much of one,' Kemlo replied calmly. 'If we release a narrow gap in the rays we could let the humpty become wedged in the opening long enough for me to destroy its antennae.' He looked at each of them in turn. 'Of course, I won't do it if you don't agree, but I think it's a good chance.'

'Well, as long as they're out there, we're stuck in here,' said Kartin. 'I'm not so scared as I was and, to tell the truth, I wouldn't mind taking a look inside that craft over there.'

'I'm beginning to feel sorry for the little humpty that's lost its partner,' said Kerowski. 'Kemlo's a good shot, and putting the other humpty out of action will show their masters that we're not afraid of them.'

'Yes, let's show them!' said Krillie, bobbing up in his seat excitedly. 'Get the ray gun, Kemlo, and shoot his whiskers off!'

The decision taken, they made rapid preparation. The canopy was drawn back, the ray gun brought from its sealed locker, and Krillie moved over to allow Kemlo to take his seat on that side of the scooter.

'"No boy shall use a ray gun without authority!"' Kerowski quoted. '"Or unless in danger of his life."'

'Oh, shut up!' said Kartin, his hand poised above the release switch which controlled the holding rays. 'Have you got the angle right, Kem?'

Kemlo peered along the sights of the ray gun, setting it with careful precision.

'Set to forty-eight degrees, open four feet,' he announced.

Kartin worked the dial, and then the switch.

'He's coming in!' Krillie cried when, immediately the rays parted, the humpty began to move forward.

'Not far, he isn't,' said Kerowski. 'He's jammed in the opening, as Kemlo said he would be.'

‘Be quiet!’ said Kemlo. ‘I’m firing in a second.’ He pressed the button and the first three charges hissed from the stubby barrel of the ray gun.

He paused and readjusted his sights before he fired another burst.

A spray of bluish flame hovered above the struggling robot for a few seconds ; then seemed to descend and envelope the humpty in a jagged circle of flame.

## Chapter 12

### THE HIDDEN POWER

‘CLOSE the rays!’ Kemlo shouted as he snicked on the safety-catch of the ray gun. ‘Shut the canopy.’

Kartin and Kerowski moved swiftly to obey his urgently voiced orders. Kemlo went back to his own seat, stowed the gun into its locker and mopped his perspiring face.

Red and orange sparks were flickering around the hull of the humpty, but its movement was halted and the shining metal strips were still.

The portable speaker was suddenly shrill with the sound of Satellite Belt K’s call signal. This was repeated three times, followed by the operator’s voice saying :

‘Come in, Kemlo craft. Satellite K calling Kemlo craft.’

Kemlo leaned forward, close to the speaker pad.

‘Kemlo answering Satellite K. Receiving you loud and clear. Can you hear me?’

‘Thank heaven we can!’ The operator sounded relieved. ‘Since we lost touch with you, relays of us have been calling you. Why didn’t you answer?’

‘Because we couldn’t,’ Kemlo retorted sharply,

for he resented the somewhat officious tone the operator had used when asking the question. 'Our radiotronic wave has been jammed.'

'That's impossible!' the operator exclaimed. 'You must have been fooling about with the switches.'

'Is the Duty Officer there, please?' Kemlo asked, trying to keep his voice polite.

'Yes, it's your father,' the operator replied. 'Cut in your viewing screen.'

'We can't. We're linked up with a portable, and our other instrument is switched to a different channel.'

The operator seemed ready to argue about this point, but they heard a quiet and authoritative voice in the background say:

'All right, operator, I'll take over now.' There was a click as the operator switched over and the welcome sound of his father's voice greeted Kemlo through the speaker.

'Hello, Kemlo! Are you all right, son?'

'Yes, we're all right, Dad. It's good to hear you.'

'It's more than good to hear *you*!' said his father. 'We've all been very anxious about you. Not only you, of course,' he added quickly, 'but Krillie and Kartin and Kerowski. You haven't come to any harm?'

'Not yet,' said Kemlo rather grimly. 'But plenty's been happening.'

'I'm eager to hear about it, but first you had better let the other boys speak so that we can record their voices and let their parents know they're safe and sound.'

Kemlo moved away from the speaker and Kartin leaned forward.

'This is Kartin calling Satellite K from Kemlo craft. I'm fit and well, although things have been a bit hectic lately. We lost contact with you, but Kemlo will explain all about that. Here's Kerowski.'

Kerowski shouldered his friend to one side to enable him to reach the speaker.

'This is the one and only Kerowski,' he announced. 'I too am fit and well—at least I'm alive. I always thought star galaxies were very pretty things, but after this you can keep all the stars and I don't care if I never see one again. Here's Krillie.'

'Hello, everyone. This is Krillie, the official scribe. Sometimes I've been scared and sometimes it's been very exciting, and I've been busy keeping my diary, but there's so much to say and explain that I'd have had to keep talking all the time to record everything as it happened. We're all in the Kemlo craft, and it's rather warm now that the humpties have been destroyed. I think Kemlo wants to talk to you, so goodbye.'

Kemlo came close to the speaker pad as his father's voice asked: 'What is all this nonsense

about humpties? What has been happening out there, Kemlo?’

‘I’ll try to tell it to you briefly, Dad. We are up against something we’ve never met before, nor been told about, so we can only assume that it doesn’t come from Earth or one of the Satellite Belts.’

Kemlo gave his father a report on everything that had happened. He tried to mention all the various movements and events without going into too detailed an explanation which would have taken a very long time. He concluded by saying :

‘That’s about all for now. We don’t quite know what will happen next and we’re keeping a sharp watch on the craft to see if any more humpties, or anything else, leave the hatchway.’

‘An amazing story!’ his father exclaimed. ‘You have done very well, and I congratulate you upon keeping your heads and tackling the problems so calmly. It must have been a very frightening experience for all of you, but don’t worry—two rescue ships are on their way. It’s a pity we can’t get any telescreen recordings through, but you’re probably wise to keep your circuits on different channels. Can you hear anything on the other speaker?’

‘There’s been a very faint whispering sound for some time now,’ Kemlo replied. He jerked as Kartin dug him in the ribs. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘Something wrong, Kemlo?’ His father’s voice became immediately concerned.

‘I don’t know, Dad. Kartin’s just dug me in the ribs for some reason. Wait a minute—he wants me to look up through the canopy.’ Kemlo did this, then yelled: ‘The coloured arc is starting to show again! Can you still hear me?’

‘Your voice sounds very mushy. Trim your controls.’

‘So does yours. You’d better trim your controls too.’ Frantically Kemlo’s fingers sped over the dials and switches; but it was no use. Above them the coloured arc grew deeper and clearer. As it reached its former size and brightness the voice in the speaker faded away and silence came again.

‘Well, that’s it,’ said Kemlo, leaning back in his seat.

‘Here we go again,’ said Kerowski with a sigh.

‘I’ll say we do.’ Kartin’s voice was serious as he raised an arm and pointed in the direction of the circular craft. Their gaze followed his pointing finger.

Down the ramp of the craft was trundling yet another robot. It looked the same as the other two, but much larger. The winking red lights glowed more brightly and the antennae seemed to wave more strongly and fiercely.

It teetered for a second or two, as if deciding



its direction, then came bowling toward the scooter.

‘The King of the Humpties!’ Kerowski exclaimed dramatically.

‘Ooh— isn’t he big!’ Krillie gasped. ‘Do you think the rays will hold *him*?’

‘There’s nothing we can do about it if they don’t,’ Kemlo replied, without thinking, and this frank acceptance of possible danger made Krillie very frightened.

He covered his face with his hands and began to cry, and it took Kartin and Kerowski a few moments to reassure him. By this time the large humpty was only a yard or two from the protective shield of the rays surrounding the scooter.

‘It will be on us in a minute,’ said Kemlo, then he laughed suddenly.

‘Don’t do that!’ Kerowski complained. ‘There’s nothing funny that I can see, and if you think there is, then you’ve got a warped sense of humour. I’m getting very fed up with these humpties.’

‘I was laughing at a sort of wager I’ve made with myself,’ said Kemlo. ‘I’ll wager a free feed that this humpty does exactly the same as the others did.’

‘You could be right,’ Kartin admitted. ‘Look at it!’

‘It’s going to hit the other one!’ Krillie yelped.

The trundling robot caught its useless colleague a glancing blow and sent it spinning away to fall on its side.

'That proves the other one's finished,' said Kemlo, 'and it proves that these robots are just obeying blind orders. Watch your eyes, fellows!'

Having once experienced the blaze of light which followed after the humpties had hit the rays, the boys were quicker this time to cover their eyes. They had not long to wait before the intense bombardment began, and Kemlo found that even the visor was not enough protection against the power of this robot's furious attack.

The attack followed the same pattern. First the assailing of the holding rays against which the robot made no progress. Then shivering in what looked like futile anger but was in fact merely the shuddering of the whirling metal strips, the hull swung on its pivots, the shutter opened and charge after charge of explosive rays were hurled against the stalwart shield of the holding rays surrounding the scooter.

It seemed to last for ever, this blinding holocaust of brilliant coloured flame, but at last it eased and Kemlo was able to say cautiously :

'I think the magazine is empty now.'

Slowly the other boys moved their hands from their eyes, blinked, and, between puckered lids, gazed toward the huge robot which appeared to be enveloped in a sizzling glow of greenish light.

‘Do you think he’s destroyed himself like the others did?’ Krillie asked anxiously.

‘We’ll see in a minute when the light dies away,’ Kemlo replied. ‘But the two waving antennae are still standing up, and although the coloured arc has faded a little, it’s still there and we’re not getting any reception.’

‘Are you going to open the rays and bop him with our gun?’ Kartin asked.

‘I am,’ said Kemlo firmly. ‘And when we’ve accounted for it, I’m going across to that craft. I don’t know how long the rescue ships will be, but while this hidden power is around us it won’t be safe to try to get off the substance. We’ve got a chance while we’re here, but once we start flying we could crash, and I’m not keen on risking that.’

‘We’ll come with you,’ they chorused eagerly.

Kemlo shook his head. ‘I thought I’d go alone; still, if one of you wants to come, I suppose that’s all right. But at least two must stay here and keep contact with Control. We know now that if we settle this humpty, the coloured arc will disappear and we’ll be able to speak to Control again. But I’m not going to sit and wait for some sort of message to get to this hidden power so that they can send out yet another of them. I’ll take the gun and two spare magazines of charges—that will give me almost three hundred shots.’

## THE HIDDEN POWER

'You oughtn't to go, Kemlo,' said Krillie. 'There might be whopping big egg-men in that craft.'

'They're not egg-men, Krillie,' said Kemlo sharply. 'They're just robots, and if we can find the master-instrument through which they're controlled we won't have any more trouble. The least we can do is to investigate that craft because the rescue ships might run into trouble. It's up to us to try to warn them if there is something bigger than these robots inside it.'

'It's cooling off now,' said Kartin, pointing toward the shimmering humpty. 'But it's still moving—trying to get through the rays.'

'Open the canopy,' said Kemlo, reaching for the ray gun. 'Get ready to take readings on the opening of the rays. Ready?'

'I'm ready,' Kartin replied. 'Take your sights.'

'Canopy open,' Kerowski announced.

They waited tensely as Kemlo aimed the ray gun and took the reading for the angle and size of opening necessary in the rays. While this was being done Krillie, with great presence of mind and speaking in a low voice, was recording everything that had happened.

The rays opened a little wider than for the previous robots because this one was considerably larger. The same thing happened immediately the rays were opened.

The robot, seared and blackened by the force of its own fire-power bouncing back from the holding rays, was still functioning although it rocked and wobbled quite a lot.

It became wedged in the gap in the rays, and Kemlo, a little more sure now of what would happen when he fired the gun, took careful aim. In six well-placed shots he had destroyed the antennae and rendered the robot useless.

At once the coloured arc faded and the voice of the Satellite Belt Control operator came clearly through the speaker.

Kemlo turned down the volume and cut the transmitting switch for a moment as he whispered tensely :

‘Who’s coming with me?’

‘Me,’ said Krillie.

‘Not you, Krillie,’ Kemlo smiled. ‘I’d get into awful trouble if I let you come with me. You know that. But you make sure that everything is recorded on your diary—that’s your job and very important.’

‘All right, Kemlo.’ Krillie sighed with disappointment.

‘Which hand have I got something in?’ said Kerowski, holding out two clenched fists toward Kartin.

‘That one,’ Kartin replied promptly, tapping Kerowski’s left hand.

‘No—this one.’ Kerowski opened his right

hand to disclose a fruit sweet, which he popped into his mouth before Kartin could grab it. 'You lose—I go.'

'Bring the other visor and your resistor set,' said Kemlo as he began to climb from the scooter. 'I'll take the spare magazines. You'd better bring the camera too.' He paused outside the scooter and fitted a tiny resistor set around his throat. 'We'll keep contact with you, Kartin. As soon as we're away from the scooter you'd better contact Control. Tell them what's happened, and explain what we're trying to do. Come on, Krow.'

Kartin closed the canopy after they had gone, then he and Krillie watched anxiously as their two friends passed through the gap in the holding rays well to the left of the robots. They halted to inspect these closely before they began to walk slowly and carefully toward the strange craft.

## Chapter 13

### FROM WHOSE WORLD ?

KEMLO and Kerowski stood beneath the huge bronze hull looking up into the open hatchway. The silence was a menacing cloak around them, and the gravity force, despite help from the holding rays spraying out from their suits, made them feel breathless after the walk from the scooter.

‘Kartin calling!’ The whispering voice reached them through the throat resistor sets.

‘Speak up, we can hardly hear you,’ said Kemlo.

‘I daren’t speak too loudly. We’ve got to keep open circuit and the Belt Control is coming through so clearly that they can hear everything we say. I’m leaning over the side of the scooter to talk to you so that they don’t pick up my voice. We’ve had to tell them that you’ve gone to investigate the craft. They’ve told me to order you to return.’

‘That’s torn it!’ Kerowski groaned. ‘Why didn’t you just say that we’d gone for a walk to stretch our legs?’

‘They’d still tell me to order you back, you dope!’ Kartin retorted in a hoarse whisper.

' Shall I tell them I haven't been able to contact you ? '

' I don't see why you should tell lies about it,' Kemlo replied after a moment's thoughtful pause. ' Is Dad still in the control-room ? '

' Yes, he and a couple of the Elders. I should say all the big cheese are in pretty much of a flap.'

' Then tell them that you have reached us and that we're in constant communication with you. Tell them that as we've come this far it seems silly for us to turn back. We have a ray gun, and up to now our training has given us enough knowledge to beat the robots.'

' I'm not telling them all that,' said Kartin. ' I'll just say you think it's safe to go on.'

' Why not borrow Krillie's resistor set and fix it close to the speaker unit ? ' Kerowski suggested.

' Why should I do that ? ' Kartin asked irritably.

' Because then we could hear them, and they should be able to pick us up through the speaker pad. What do you think, Kem ? '

' Try it and see,' said Kemlo. ' Explain what you're going to do, and ask them to stand by to receive a direct message from me.'

There was a short wait which Kemlo and Kerowski spent in moving a little way up the ramp and peering into the open hatchway of the craft.



'There's a reflection of green light,' said Kemlo. 'Can you see it, Krow?'

'Yes; like a light shining through an open door. There's no sign of movement though. If anything's inside they must have seen us coming.'

Just then the resistors crackled with a faint but clearly recognisable voice.

'Kemlo! This is your father calling from Satellite K Control. You and Kerowski are to return to your scooter at once! That's an order!'

'I can't hear you very well, Dad.' Kemlo winked at Kerowski.

'If you heard well enough to identify me, you must have heard what I said. Go back to your scooter!'

'Oh, the scooter's all right,' said Kemlo. 'We can see both of them clearly from where we are. We're standing halfway up the ramp of the craft. There's no sign of movement from inside the craft, and Kerowski and I are going slowly up to the opening.'

*'Kemlo! Go back to your scooter!'*

'Don't shout, Dad. Your voice is all mushy and distorted, and you might blow our resistors.'

'Very well.' His father spoke in a cold stern voice after a brief silence. 'Obviously you don't intend to hear any orders. You are determined to investigate that craft however dangerous it

might be. Well, if you won't think of yourselves, you might think of your parents and friends who are worrying about you both.'

'We're fine, Dad,' said Kemlo in a more concerned tone, beginning to feel his conscience bothering him. 'Don't worry about us. We're just at the top of the ramp now, looking inside the hull. There's a greenish light spreading from the open hatchway leading on to the empty exit chute.'

'All right, Kemlo; keep talking!' His father's voice sounded resigned, but held a note which, without words, meant that when Kemlo *did* return there would be an accounting for this insubordination.

Kerowski evidently thought the same thing, for he pulled a wry face as he looked at Kemlo and they both shrugged. In their minds was the thought that some slight punishment when they returned would be worth it.

'I'll let Kerowski speak as well,' said Kemlo, 'then you'll know we're both all right.'

'We've now reached the exit chute and are moving toward the open hatchway.' Kerowski took up the story. 'We have shut off our holding rays because they prevented us moving through this narrow opening, but inside the craft the gravity of the substance is hardly noticeable. I am standing aside while Kemlo looks around the open hatchway. What do you see, Kem?'

‘Glump!’ was the sound that came from the resistor, and across half a million miles of space to the listeners in the Satellite Belt control-room. But to Kerowski, who was able to see Kemlo’s expression and actions, it was a gulp and the swallowing of his half-voiced exclamation of surprise.

‘By my previous remarks you will gather that we are somewhat surprised,’ said Kerowski with admirable presence of mind. ‘I am now going to look around the hatchway opening while Kemlo explains what he saw.’

‘There’s a semi-circular control compartment,’ Kemlo began. ‘And it’s filled with a green light coming from slots positioned around where the curving wall and domed ceiling join ——’ He was interrupted at this point.

‘Whoosh!’ Kerowski exclaimed, pulling his head back quickly. ‘Some humpty!’

‘Kerowski has now seen what I saw,’ Kemlo continued. ‘The compartment is rather weird when you first see it. The whole of the curving wall is filled with ribs of what look like coloured metal. From these ribs extend what seem to be horrible waving snaky things; but when you look more carefully you see that they’re only antennae. It’s possible that the different colours represent the same things our instruments do to us.’

‘You’re not making much sense, Kemlo.’ His

father's voice came sharply to his ears. 'You say there is a compartment with a domed ceiling and a curving wall which is filled with different-coloured metal strips and from which various-shaped antennae protrude. But all antennae must have a point of contact for reception or transmission. Look again carefully and see if you can find where it is.'

'We don't need to,' said Kerowski. 'It's a blinking great humpty fixed to the floor in the middle of the compartment!'

'I wish you wouldn't use those childish names,' said Kemlo's father. 'I understand that you have been able to neutralise several robots carried in this machine. Do you mean this is another of them?'

'It ain't nothing else but,' Kerowski replied facetiously. 'And if we stop talking for a moment we might be able to hear those whispering voices our speaker picked up.'

'Then be quiet for two minutes,' said Kemlo's father. 'No longer.'

The boys looked at each other and, in a mutual endeavour to give themselves more confidence, grasped hands as they stepped into the compartment.

Listening intently they could hear the faint sibilant rustling, as of foreign-sounding voices whispering all around them.

The large robot, egg-shaped, gleaming like

polished gold in the green light, had six long waving antennae protruding from its upper half. The boys noticed that not more than two of these antennae moved at the same time. Kemlo pointed, and Kerowski nodded to show he understood what Kemlo meant.

One of the longer antennae was waving gently in a direct line with a bunch of smaller antennae which sprouted from a red strip of metal.

Kemlo pulled a pair of fine plastic gloves from his pocket, put them on and grasped the butt of the ray gun. Giving Kerowski a warning look he raised the weapon slowly and brought it between the small gaps separating the end of the large antennae and those of the smaller ones.

The large antennae from the robot immediately became still, but the smaller antennae became very agitated. As soon as Kemlo lowered the gun and stood back the large antennae began to move again.

'Your two minutes are up,' said his father. 'Did you hear anything?'

'Yes, we did,' Kemlo replied slowly, and went on to explain exactly what he had done.

'You're taking too much of a risk, son. Unless you can find some main control to neutralise those antennae, don't go within range of them. Obviously it's a remote-control craft, and the antennae are transmitting everything back to . . .' His father hesitated.

'Back to where, Dad?' Kemlo asked innocently, but he was grinning broadly.

'Kemlo—listen to me.' His father's voice was very serious. 'It's no use trying to fool you by pretending. We do not know from whose world that craft has come, nor to whose world any messages or impulses are being returned. You're meddling with something even we don't understand. Go back to your scooter, and wait there in safety until the rescue ships arrive. Fully trained and experienced Star Men are in those ships. Leave it to them.'

'I suppose you're right, Dad,' Kemlo agreed regretfully. 'I know that the Inter-planetary Commission have specially trained men who do research work on galaxies and minor stars, and this really is their job.'

'I don't see that argument.' Kerowski's voice was suddenly aggressive and he glared angrily at Kemlo. 'We were sent on a sky patrol to observe a minor galaxy,' he went on, speaking clearly so that Control would hear his words. 'If the Star Men and scientists are so clever, why did they let us boys go on that patrol? I'll tell you why.' He raised his hand in a dramatic gesture and thundered: 'BECAUSE THEY DID NOT KNOW—BECAUSE THEY NEVER KNOW FOR SURE!' He lowered his voice slightly. 'I don't mean to be rude or insulting to my superiors, but, after all, it is *we* who are stuck

in the middle of a star cloud and have had to beat off an attack by egg-shaped robots. I think it's a fine time to tell us to go back and sit in our scooter when nobody seems to know any more about this than we do !'

'Have you quite finished, Kerowski?' Kemlo's father's voice was stern.

Kemlo had gazed in amazement at his friend while he had been speaking. Kerowski realised that he had spoken rather too freely and was now looking very glum.

'Yes, sir,' he replied in a mollified tone. Then he raised his head and a defiant glint came into his eyes. 'But I don't take any of it back, sir,' he said firmly but politely.

'I'm very glad to hear it,' was the surprising reply. 'You made out a very good case, but you forgot one small point, Kerowski. Your sky patrol was safe in its position, some four or five thousand miles from the galaxy. For some reason or other, you and Kemlo decided to go closer despite your instructions, and it is as a result of that disobedience that you are now in the position of having to be rescued. The reason why we ordered you to observe the minor galaxy from not closer than four thousand miles should be obvious to you by now. Would you agree with that, Kerowski?'

'Er . . .' Kerowski hesitated and shrugged fiercely at Kemlo. Both boys knew that if

Kerowski explained how they came to be trapped by the star cloud they would put all their friends in the patrol in trouble, for it was these friends who, by starting a race, had caused the two scooters to fly too close to the galaxy. So Kerowski merely gulped and said sadly : ' Yes, sir, you're quite right.'

' Before you go,'—Kemlo's father became more brisk—' Kartin tells me you have taken a camera with you. Go to the hatchway through which you entered the craft and get a good photograph of the whole of that compartment. And keep away from those antennae,' he added warningly.

' There's not much to photograph, Dad,' said Kemlo. ' It's big, with plenty of light, no instruments as we know them, and this robot thing perched in the middle of the floor with antennae waving from it.'

' Then take a photograph of that,' said his father irritably. ' Do as you're told, Kemlo, and stop arguing.'

' Very well, Dad.' Kemlo motioned to Kerowski and together they began to move back to the hatchway.

The antennae were waving furiously and little whispering sounds came from all around them. The boys had almost reached the hatchway when Kemlo, who was slightly in the lead, peered through it and exclaimed :

' The exit chute's closed !'



‘Look out, Kem! Stop it!’ Kerowski pointed and they both leapt forward—but they were too late.

Slowly, remorselessly, the hatchway was swinging shut.

## Chapter 14

### COOL COURAGE

'YEOW!' Kerowski yelped. 'Now we're for it. Some dope's slammed the door!'

'We're the dopes,' Kemlo retorted. 'We should have realised that this remote-control power is pretty effective. And we're out of contact too. The resistors are dead.'

'The craft's sealed itself up and cut us off. The radiotronic waves can't get through to us.'

'A brilliant deduction!' said Kemlo crossly. 'What if this thing takes off?'

'I feel sick,' said Kerowski.

'Listen!' Kemlo held up his hand for silence.

A slow pulsing sound murmured through the compartment. The floor vibrated slightly and a warmth began to spread around them.

'It's getting ready to take off!' Kemlo cried. 'We've got to stop it!'

'How?' Kerowski waved one hand feebly. 'Where are the controls?'

'Pause and ponder.' Kemlo clenched his fists in an effort of concentration. 'Pause and ponder,' he muttered several times.

'Oh, fine!' Kerowski exclaimed. 'We pause

now and spend the rest of our lives pondering in some planetarian prison.'

'The answer must be in those bunches of antennae.' Kemlo ignored his friend's pessimistic forecast. 'Neutralise those and we stop any orders from this thing's remote control. Think, Krow—*think!*'

'I'm sunk,' Kerowski groaned. 'And when I'm sunk I can't think.'

'We can't reach anything behind those sealed metal walls,' said Kemlo, speaking slowly and tensely while he gazed swiftly around the compartment. 'We can't pull out the antennae either.' He hesitated, then exclaimed: 'That's it!'

'Tell me what and I'll agree with you.'

'Look around the base of the wall where it joins the floor,' Kemlo ordered urgently. 'If the power unit is beneath us, or even on the same level, and this humpty is the craft's control-panel, there must be some connection leading to it.'

It was getting warmer now, and both boys were beginning to feel uncomfortable, but they crawled on their hands and knees, searching for a connection running from the control-panel of the robot to the power unit of the craft.

They began to feel very afraid and despondent when they could find no sign of trailing wires or antennae connections.

They had been searching each side of the robot, and now Kemlo was working his way across the

floor to Kerowski's side. Previously they had been too scared to go very close to the robot, but fear gave them a cooler courage than they might have had in less desperate circumstances.

Neither boy had tried to cross in front of the robot between its antennae and those on the metal wall of the compartment, but when in a crouching position Kemlo was below the waving antennae and could see the front of the robot's base.

'Here it is!' he called huskily. The warmth was becoming oppressive and breathing was not easy.

Kerowski's long legs yanked him across the floor toward Kemlo.

'Look!' Kemlo pointed. 'There's a thick cord coming out of the floor to join the base of the robot, and you can see through this funny sort of window.'

Kerowski brushed perspiration from his forehead and peered closer.

'They look like whirling gyroscopes,' he observed.

'I don't care what they look like,' said Kemlo, panting a little. 'They must be something to do with the main control of this robot, which in turn controls the power unit in answer to messages it receives through the antennae. We'd better put on our visors, then stand back, and I'll try to blow it up with the gun.'

He began to move back, climbed to his feet and hurried toward the hatchway, where Kerowski joined him. Both boys pulled on their visors.

'You're liable to blow us up too,' said Kerowski. 'Or else stifle us. It's pretty hot in here already.'

'There's no time to worry about that. Lie down on the floor, Krow. I'll kneel beside you and aim carefully. I don't want to use too many charges and create more heat than I need. Get down, quickly!'

Kerowski lay flat on the floor and, resting his chin on his hands, gazed anxiously at the robot.

Kemlo lowered himself on one knee, raised the gun, sighted it very carefully and snicked off the safety-catch; then after a whispered 'Ready!' he pressed the firing button.

The rays slammed dead centre just below the window-like aperture at the base of the robot.

One or two of the charges hit the metal, caroomed upward and fell perilously near to Kerowski, but fortunately they had expended themselves and he was unharmed.

Kemlo waited a few seconds for the first glare of the charges to disappear before he sighted and fired again. Suddenly a vivid streak of green light shot up at an angle from the base of the robot, hung poised, then slowly faded. A second or two later the green lighting in the compartment flared to an almost blinding intensity before



He pressed the firing button

it shut off completely and a stygian blackness pressed across the boys' eyes.

No doubt the visors had saved their eyes from injury, but the first flash of green light had been so brilliant it had made them wince. The second had seemed to sear their eyeballs, and now the blackness left them stunned.

Kemlo blinked his eyes, but when, after several attempts, he still could not see, he had to fight the cold panic of fear which rose within him, making him want to cry out aloud. Only the sudden touch of Kerowski's groping hand upon his shoulder and his friend's whispering voice saved him from letting panic overwhelm him.

'I'm blind, Kem! I can't see a thing!'

'Nor can I, Krow. I never knew blackness could be so black.'

'You think that green light did it?'

'Must have. But we can't be blind—we just can't be blind, Krow.'

'I don't know,' said Kerowski miserably. 'My head hurts. I keep blinking my eyes, but I can't see anything.'

'The vibration's stopped and it's getting cooler.' Kemlo tried to urge more confidence into his voice. 'I'm going to try something. I'm going to fire one charge and aim it across the compartment. Just one shouldn't do any harm if it bounces off. Are you willing to risk it with me?'

'I'll risk anything with you. But why do you want to do that?'

'Because if we can see the flash we'll know we're not blind.'

'Then fire—quickly!'

Kemlo felt Kerowski's hand grip harder upon his shoulder as he carefully levelled the gun well away from his body, aiming the barrel in a direction where he assumed it would be pointing toward the most distant area of the compartment. He snicked off the safety-catch, pressed the firing button once and pulled on the safety-catch again.

The next second the ray exploded against the far wall in a sparkling scatter of light.

'I'm a proper dope!' Kerowski tried to laugh, but the result sounded more like a sob. 'I've got a torch in my inside pocket.'

'We're both dopes,' Kemlo said, and giggled weakly. 'So have I!' He put down the gun, pushed it away from his body and stretched out beside Kerowski. 'I'm tired, very tired,' he said.

'So am I. Wish we were back in our cubicles. I could sleep for weeks.'

'We're not quite as tough as we think, are we?'

'Who wants to be tough? I'm only a boy. I've got plenty of time to be tough when I'm grown up. Being grown up is tough.'

'Dad will be worried about us.'



‘Are you sorry we didn’t do as we were told?’ Kerowski stirred slightly.

‘No, not really. Do you think we shall ever find anything in space that we *do* understand?’

‘I don’t expect so. You know something, Kem?’

‘What?’

‘We’re talking stupidly.’

‘I know.’ Kemlo eased himself up from the floor. ‘It must be shock. I’m terribly thirsty.’

‘So am I—and hungry.’

‘Then let’s see about getting out of here.’ The lethargy began to leave Kemlo’s mind. ‘Got your torch?’ He groped inside his suit and pulled out his own flat portable torch.

In a moment the beams from the two torches were waving in a wide arc around the compartment.

‘That must have been the main control,’ said Kemlo as he focused the beam on the base of the robot.

‘Even the beam from these isn’t very bright, is it?’ Kerowski complained.

‘It would be if we took off our visors.’ Kemlo chuckled as he reached up and eased the visor over his head. ‘That’s better. Let’s go over and take a look at that section I’ve burned out with the gun.’

They edged cautiously across the floor of the compartment and stooped to inspect the shattered

base of the robot. It was not so much the base, which appeared to be composed of some extremely tough metallic substance, as the thick cord and window-like aperture which had been destroyed.

'I don't know who invented or built this thing,' said Kemlo, squatting on his haunches, 'but surely no matter what world you come from, if you invent a machine to fly through space, even by remote control, you must follow ordinary engineering principles.'

'You're feeling better so now I get a lecture,' said Kerowski.

'You always accuse me of lecturing,' Kemlo complained. 'I'm only trying to explain the things we're brought up to understand and trained to do. What is the first safety principle when you're designing a space craft?'

'Search me,' Kerowski replied helpfully. 'And if you do, you won't find the answer.'

'There are two main principles in building space craft. I mean, craft that have to be sealed up; not craft like our scooters.'

'Well?'

'Well, you have to allow that if all the instruments and gear break down, no craft can become unsealed in flight.'

'You're perfectly right,' Kerowski agreed brightly. 'I was just about to say the same thing.'

Kemlo ignored his friend and continued with

his own theories. 'But you also have to make sure that any craft which lands back on Earth, or on the moon or another planet, and is damaged, must have some sort of gadget fitted that will unseal it automatically.'

'You mean there should be an automatic unsealing mechanism in this thing?'

'Why not? It looks as if we've destroyed the main control, stopped the power unit, burned out all the lighting, and now we're sealed inside it. But there are still some strands left whole on this thick cord leading into the base of the robot.' Kemlo flashed his torch upward. 'And two antennae are still moving, although the others are stationary and hanging down.'

'Then all we've got to do is to disconnect those—only they'll probably blow us to pieces when we do it,' Kerowski suggested cheerfully.

'I know you meant that as a joke, but you could be right and not know it.'

'How do we break those two antennae?'

'I'll unload the ray gun and use that as a lever and see if I can snap them. You stand over by the hatchway and focus your torch beam on me. The gun butt is insulated and so are these plastic gloves; at least they'll provide some insulation.'

'I don't know, Kem,' said Kerowski doubtfully. 'If we stay here the rescue crews will arrive and batter their way into us.'

'That's a fine suggestion!' Kemlo was scornful. 'We got into this thing—let's get ourselves out of it if we can. We've taken enough chances; we might as well take one more.'

'All right,' Kerowski agreed. 'I'll go over to the hatchway.'

When Kerowski directed his torch beam on to the burned and shattered section through which the thick cord ran, Kemlo could see the two unbroken strands quite clearly, so sliding the barrel of the gun gently under them he levered it until the long sharp foresight was caught against the two strands.

'I'm going to give it one big pull,' he announced. 'Stand by.'

He took a firm grip on the butt of the gun and, with one terrific heave, ripped the foresight and barrel against the strands, which snapped quite easily.

The impact sent him backward with a rush, and because there was not much gravity Kemlo was halfway across the compartment before he could stop himself.

But before he had time to exercise his muscle control the compartment was filled with a red glowing light. In the same second that this appeared he heard Kerowski yell, and, turning quickly, saw his friend disappearing through the open hatchway.

Kerowski had been leaning against it, and when



## *Chapter 15*

### THE STAR MEN

THE two boys staggered back to the scooter, and when they had passed behind the shield of its holding rays they again turned to watch the hull of the strange craft slowly become one great glow of heat.

For a few moments they ignored the clamouring voices in the resistors and those booming out from the speaker. The sight of the craft as it sank smaller and smaller into an all-consuming mass of heat was too awe-inspiring even to describe, or do anything else but watch.

Strangely, the heat from it was not as great as might have been expected. It seemed to be consuming itself in a localised fire ; yet it could not truthfully be described as a fire because there was no flame, no furnace-like roar. This could be explained by the lack of oxygen, and possibly was the main reason ; but it did not entirely explain how the craft had, on a sudden, begun to generate so much heat that it was melting itself to destruction.

‘It’s cooling now,’ said Kemlo huskily, hardly recognising his own voice.

‘What is cooling?’ The voice of his father

came urgently through the speaker. 'I demand that you report on what is happening.'

Kemlo pulled the resistor set from his throat. Leaning over the side of the scooter, still husky but trying to keep his voice steady, he said :

'This is Kemlo, Dad. We're safely back at the scooter, but we've had a pretty exhausting time. Give us a few minutes to have a drink and a rest.'

'Thank heaven you're safe !' His father's voice was filled with relief. 'You and Kerowski rest and look after yourselves, but let Kartin tell us something of what's been happening.'

'All right, Dad. We won't be long, but Kartin will take over now.'

Kemlo and Kerowski climbed into the scooter, and Krillie unashamedly threw his arms around Kemlo's neck as he whispered :

'I thought I'd never see you again, Kemlo ! When that exit chute closed and the rocket thing started I was so scared for you I couldn't even scream, although I wanted to.'

Kemlo gripped Krillie's shoulder and gave him a gentle shake, but as he looked at his young friend his eyes were kind and understanding.

'I'm sorry it was so bad for you, Krillie. It's always worse when you're waiting. I remember when I was about your age, Dad went out in a new experimental space craft and something went wrong with it. Waiting for some sort of news

was awful.' He gave Krillie's ear a tug and said more cheerfully: 'How about getting Krow and me a drink?'

Krillie quickly recovered from his spontaneous emotion, and soon Kemlo and Kerowski were swallowing fruit drink, which tasted like nectar to them. They munched some food as well, but it was liquid they needed most; then stretching out as best they could in the cramped after-part of the scooter they looked at each other and grinned understandingly. As they went on with their meal they listened drowsily to Kartin, who, it appeared, had already explained to Satellite K Control how he and Krillie had watched the exit chute of the craft close and a green light filter from the slots around the centre of its hull; how they saw the start of the rocket exhausts—at least, he was careful to add, what they called rocket exhausts for want of greater knowledge.

'Then the green light from the slots in the hull became so brilliant that it dazzled us,' Kartin continued. 'Suddenly it went out, and we could only see the growing light from what we've called the rocket exhausts. We could hear a faint humming, as if a power unit was building up to speed. After that, the slots began to glow with a faint red light. This glow spread all around the centre, and we realised that the thing was on fire. I'm sorry we couldn't tell you all this while it was happening, sir, but we were so



scared for Kemlo and Kerowski and staring so hard, we just weren't able to concentrate on saying anything.'

'We understand that, Kartin. It was a very bad time for all of us, and it must have been even worse for those two inside the craft. How are they feeling now?'

Kartin glanced back over his shoulder and raised his eyebrows in a questioning expression.

'They look a lot more rested,' he replied, turning again toward the speaker, 'but they were pretty whacked when they got back here.'

'Ask him when we can expect the rescue ships,' Kemlo whispered.

Kartin repeated the question.

'They should be with you in a few hours,' was the reply. 'Has that craft completely melted?'

Kartin looked up from the speaker and studied the scene for a moment.

'It's still glowing a dull red, sir, but it's shrunk to about a quarter of its original size, and it looks as if it's melted.'

Kemlo finished his last bite of food and, after taking one final drink, tapped Kartin on the shoulder.

'I'll have a few words now, if you like,' he offered. As Kartin drew away from the speaker Kemlo eased forward and said cheerfully :

'Hello, Dad ! If you like, I'll tell you briefly what happened to us inside the craft, and then

I think we should all get some sleep. Krillie looks like a little ghost, and Kartin can hardly keep his eyes open.'

'I think that is a good idea,' his father agreed. 'We can do with some rest ourselves, and I'm grateful to the Elders for allowing me to take the main watch and keep contact with you. It's been a big strain on all of us, but a brief report from you now will help our engineers and scientists to go to work. Make it brief, son, and we'll fill in the details later ; just tell us all the important points.'

Kemlo, although tired, was able to give Control a clear description of the inside of the craft and the way the antennae appeared to control the robots. He told of the sudden sealing of the hatchway and exit chute, and their final desperate means of freeing themselves ; and how this, obviously, had caused the craft to be destroyed.

When he had finished this short report his father said : 'Just one moment, Kemlo, before you rest. The Chief Elder wishes to say a few words to you.'

Kemlo looked at his friends and saw an expression on their faces he was sure must be mirrored on his own. The Elders were the men who controlled the Satellite Belt. In many ways they had more power than kings or governments on Earth, and were chosen for this office because of their knowledge and wisdom.

Kemlo's father and other senior technicians often saw them, but to the boys the Elders were somewhat awesome people. A boy had to do something very bad—or exceptionally good—before he was spoken to by an Elder. Kemlo thought a little resentfully that his nibs might have waited until they got back to the Belt before he started roasting them.

Then a deeply resonant voice spoke.

‘This is the Chief Elder of Satellite K speaking to our four boys in Kemlo craft. I wish I could see you now, because I am sure you must all be looking desperately tired after your experiences. Yet your voices show that you have still the eager courage of which we are so proud. Before you sleep and, I hope, awake to find the rescue ships near you, I want you to know that there will not be any punishment awaiting you for the disobedience of orders, of which all of you are guilty.

‘Your friends in the sky patrol have returned and told us how they started a race and were saved from danger by Kemlo and the Red Flash craft. But you and Kerowski ignored my chief technician's order, and that was wrong of you. Disobedience is not to be encouraged, of course, but when you grapple with the results of your own disobedience in such an intelligent and courageous manner, it would be most unfair to levy punishment.

'You may know that in this space world of ours there are honourable ranks given to highly skilled men who ever seek to solve the mysteries of our Universe. High in these ranks are the Star Men, who specialise in the hazardous work of investigating new galaxies which so often appear in our sky. All face danger, many die ; but those who live and work among the stars are proud and courageous men.

'I thought this would be the proper time to tell you boys that your names will be entered on the roll of the Star Men. You will be the first honorary Star Men, and we are proud that four boys from Belt K have achieved this honour.

'The captain of the Star Men on their way to you is Balbo Emrich. Tell him everything you have experienced—even the tiniest details. Now I leave you to your sleep. Goodbye, boys.'

There followed a muttering of voices, as if the Elder were speaking to others in the control-room as he turned away from the speaker pad. Then Kemlo's father said : 'Have a good sleep, lads. We'll send out a call signal to wake you as soon as the rescue ships report that they are through the star cloud.'

The boys leaned back from the positions they had adopted, hunched over the speaker.

'I,' Kerowski declared dramatically, 'am Star Man !' He pulled a fierce expression and lowered his voice in imitation of the rich tone

of that of the Elder. 'And it is only fitting,' he continued in this voice, 'that you horrible specimens should be associated with me in this great honour.' Kerowski reached forward and patted Kemlo and Kartin on the head, then flicked a long-fingered hand over and tweaked Krillie's nose. 'Of course, I don't know what the honourable company of Star Men is coming to when we have to accept such rabble'—he sighed gustily and shrugged—'but I think perhaps I shall learn to like you. It will be hard, but I shall try.'

How long Kerowski would have continued in this theatrical fashion is doubtful. Possibly a long time, for when he got wound up he had the gift of declaiming at great length on any subject. He didn't always make sense, but he very often provided considerable amusement. But on this occasion both Kemlo and Kartin had had enough, and after a short struggle in the confines of the scooter, which concluded with Krillie's sitting on Kerowski's head, he gave up more quickly than usual.

'Well, we can't all sleep here in comfort, can we?' Kartin panted when the rumpus was over. 'Come on, Krow; let's get back to our own scooter.'

'I shall be glad to,' said Kerowski in a haughty tone. 'To be set upon by my own Star Men is more than I can bear.' Then he added more seriously: 'I sincerely hope that whoever owns

that now defunct craft won't send hordes of humpties to disturb us.'

'You two take your portable and go back to your scooter, then we'll seal up and have some sleep,' said Kemlo.

In a few moments Kartin and Kerowski were on their way back to their scooter. Kemlo sealed the canopy and he and Krillie watched until their friends were safely inside the scooter, with the holding rays flowing protectively around it.

'All set?' Kemlo asked as he re-set his speaker to the proper channel.

'Everything in order,' Kartin replied. 'Sleep well, you two.'

'And you,' said Kemlo. He lowered the speaker volume and grinned at Krillie. 'The call signal will be our alarm clock. We don't want it too loud, do we?'

'Not too loud,' Krillie agreed, blinking his eyes sleepily.

Kemlo lifted his arm and Krillie stretched out on his seat and lay across Kemlo's knees. His hand grasped Kemlo's hand, and in a moment or two he was fast asleep.

Kemlo stretched himself gently, made his position comfortable against the padded side of the scooter, leaned back and began thinking of the events of the past hours. But these thoughts didn't last long and sleep came—deep and dreamless.

The call signal buzzed several times before its

sound brought Kemlo to complete wakefulness. It hardly disturbed Krillie, and Kemlo had to lift the sleeping boy upright and slide him over into his own seat. By the time he had done this the control-room operator's voice was calling:

'This is Satellite K. Control calling Kemlo craft. Come in, Kemlo craft. Wakey, wakey!'

Kemlo manipulated the dials and, to his great joy, saw that an image was forming on the screen. It was blurred but recognisable as Tom, the friendly technician with whom he had carried out his proving tests before the patrol had left the Belt.

'Hello, Tom!' Kemlo exclaimed. 'I can just distinguish you! The picture's not good, but it's more than I expected.'

'Ah, we're pretty clever up here,' Tom replied. 'We've set up a portable wave relay. The rescue ships set it down on their way to you, and we're bouncing the waves off that, so you should get a signal of some sort.'

'That's great! But what are you doing on Control, Tom?'

'Emergency relief.' Tom chuckled. 'You've about worn out all the regular operators. They've been day and night on the job, and during the time they couldn't contact you it was a tough session for everyone. Two of them collapsed from exhaustion.'

'Cissies,' Kemlo replied uncharitably. 'Are the ships near us?'

'They're right above you. I'm holding your radiotronic wave and picture beam on a separate channel. But now I'll hold the wave and switch you over to the captain's ship. You'll hear me but you won't see me.' Tom's voice became louder as he called: 'Kemlo craft waiting to receive you, Captain Emrich. Take the beam. She's all yours.'

There was a flickering on the screen, a brief fading; then a greater brightness as the head and shoulders of a space-suited figure appeared—a dark, strongly featured face of a man who was smiling as the picture formed and his voice came through the speaker.

'Captain Balbo Emrich calling Kemlo. Trying to pinch one of our stars, eh, young 'un? Everything all right down there?'

'I've only just woken up,' Kemlo replied. 'I haven't looked around yet, but it seems to be.'

'We've got instrument reaction up here. Take a look through your canopy, Kemlo; tell me if you see anything.'

Kemlo looked up from the screen, gazed around and gasped.

'There's another of them!' he exclaimed. 'It's spinning in straight ahead of us!'

Captain Emrich laughed joyously.

'We'll get him,' he cried. 'Sit tight, Kemlo—here we come!'



## Chapter 16

### PRIZE OF THE STARS

KRILLIE woke up, rubbed his eyes and yawned. After gazing sleepily around he became aware of the excitement and immediately switched on the recorder.

The speaker was clamouring with voices now: Kartin was yelling to wake Kerowski; Tom was demanding information; and Captain Emrich was issuing curt orders to his crew in both rescue ships.

Kemlo could do nothing except call loudly into the speaker pad: 'Kartin, shut up! Leave the circuit free.' Then he added more calmly: 'Kemlo craft to Control. Rescue ships have now taken over circuit. Urgent that you leave them to it.' He leaned back in his seat and, using the binoculars, watched the spinning craft circling high above the scooter.

'It's another one!' Krillie exclaimed, grabbing his own binoculars. 'Look, Kemlo, look!'

'I *am* looking,' Kemlo replied. 'Keep quiet! You'll hear more then because we're tuned to the rescue ships.'

'Emrich calling ship number two,' came the steady voice. 'Are all instructions carried out?'

'All cleared for action, Skipper,' said another voice. 'Ready when you give the word.'

'Right! Let's go!'

Kemlo raised the binoculars until he was focusing on the dark star cloud directly overhead. For a moment or two he could see nothing; then he saw the swirling purple-red mass and, tiny like a silver fish, one of the rescue ships broke through it.

The spinning craft was edging lower now, although it didn't seem in any hurry to land.

It was Krillie who noticed the other rescue ship.

'Over there, Kemlo!' He pointed to the left and Kemlo swung around in his seat.

The other rescue ship had broken through the star cloud and was flashing at colossal speed through the last dark patches. Even as Kemlo watched, so it entered the pearly light and became larger. He turned again to try to sight the other ship, but it was a moment before he could do so, and then he saw it quite clearly ahead, aiming diagonally in downward flight.

'They're crossing,' said Krillie, who just could not keep quiet. 'They're crossing; now they're turning and coming around to join up!'

'They won't join up,' said Kemlo confidently, forgetting his own request for silence. 'They're slowing too.'

The rescue ships were larger now, only a few thousand feet away—gleaming silver monsters,

torpedo-shaped, but the smooth lines were rather spoiled by a big circular grid-like attachment at the tail of both ships.

‘What are those things on their tails?’ Krillie asked.

‘I don’t know for sure. It’s some attachment they use to prevent themselves being drawn into a whirling cosmic mass. We’ve had lessons on them, but you just can’t remember everything. Now do shut up, Krillie, and let’s watch.’

The ships were flying parallel about two thousand feet apart, and the spinning craft was circling some three thousand feet below them.

‘Reaching angle degrees of flight, Balbo,’ said the voice Kemlo had heard from the second ship.

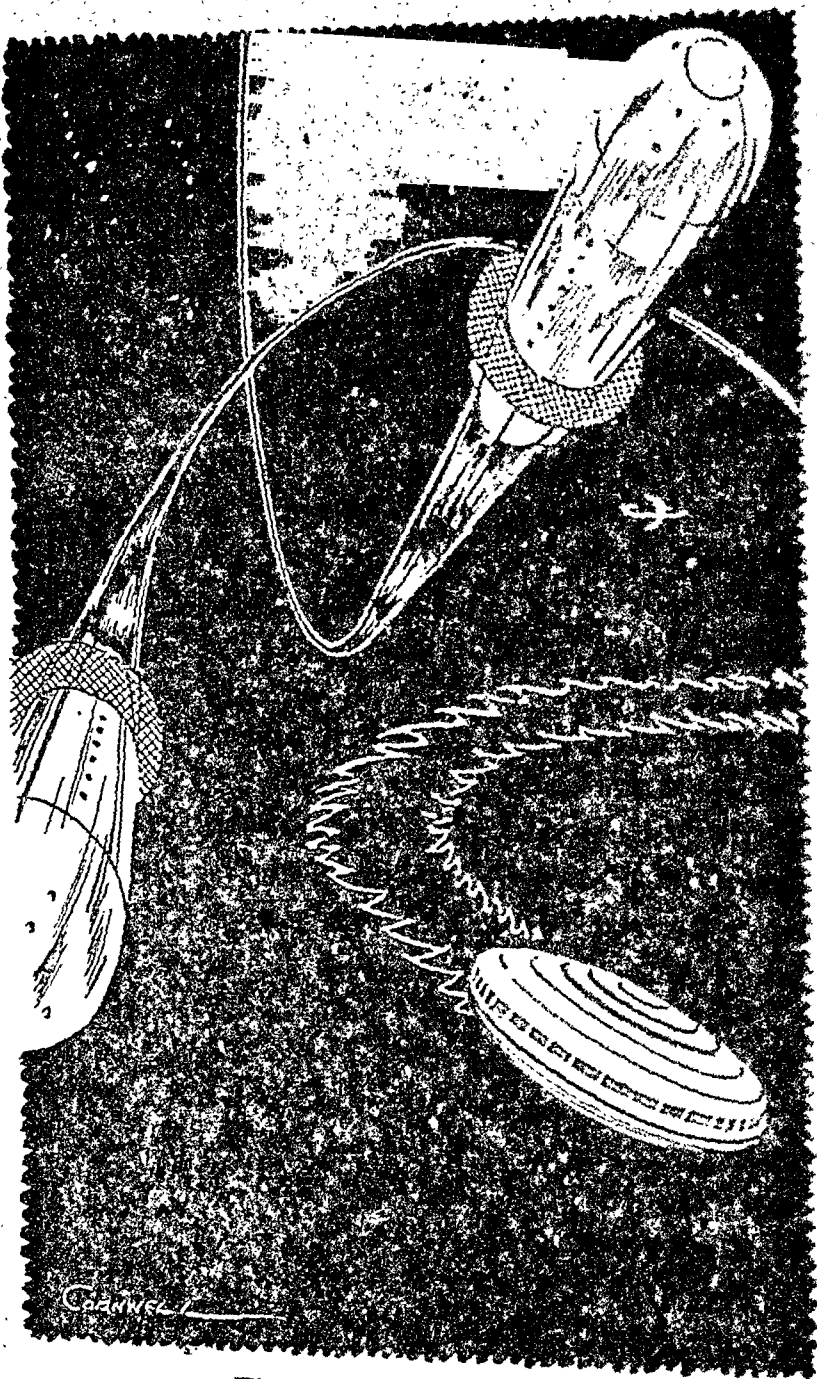
‘Steady as you go, Mac,’ Captain Emrich replied. ‘We’ll have a job to hold her. Might make your crate buck a little. Watch it now.’

‘I’ll watch it, Skipper. Inclining now. With you.’

‘Raise your lower grid, Mac.’ The captain’s voice was sharp. ‘If that thing forces us down, you’ll scrape on the substance.’

‘Rear engineer!’ Mac’s voice roared. ‘Wake up, you dolt! Raise the grid!’

Kemlo found it absorbing to watch the manoeuvring of these great ships and at the same time hear the cross-talk between the captain and his second in command. Had it not been for this conversation he wouldn’t have noticed



They turned in a narrow arc

the lower half of the grid-like structure at the tail of the ships had been raised on the captain's ship, and now was being raised on the second one.

The two ships were converging and soon they had swooped until they were level with the spinning craft ; then they zoomed away, turned in a narrow arc of flight and came in again at an angle. This time their speed was much slower, and Kemlo could see the opalescent flare of powerful holding rays beaming out from the sides of both ships. The rays came from the sides nearest to the spinning craft, and the line of flight was bringing the ships nearer and nearer to it.

Suddenly, when it seemed that only a miracle could prevent them from crashing into it, both ships straightened on-course and flew at the same speed as that of the spinning craft. The holding rays pressed against it, imprisoning it in a vice-like clamp.

'Got him !' Captain Emrich's voice sounded triumphant. 'Easy now, Mac—easy !'

'You're right, Balbo !' Mac's voice was tense with excitement. 'You said they'd figure it was a substance when our rays made contact. It's slowing down.'

'So are we,' the captain replied. 'Circle with it once more. Is she fighting you much ?'

'Hardly at all. Lot of pressure on the rays though.'

## PRIZE OF THE STARS

'Same with us. Bring her round now, Mac. Steady as she goes.'

Krillie was watching with his mouth open and his eyes so wide it seemed as if they would pop out.

'They've captured it right up there!' he exclaimed.

'That's pretty wonderful, isn't it?' Kemlo spoke in an admiring voice. 'They've trapped it between the holding rays and are bringing it down. Great hurtling meteors! What skill!'

'If I don't say something I shall burst,' said Kerowski's voice. 'What do you think of that show, Kem?'

'Almost too super to be true,' Kemlo replied.

'They're nearly on the substance now,'—Kartin's voice was quivering with excitement—'and the craft's stopped spinning. They're landing pretty fast, aren't they, Kem?'

'Yes.' Kemlo gripped the side of the scooter. 'They must have terrific back pressure, because they're almost hovering now. They're lowering it down as if it were . . .' He hesitated, lost for a word.

'As if it were a bowl of jelly?' Krillie suggested, and his remark brought a cackle of laughter from Kartin and Kerowski.

'They've surrounded it with the holding rays and the rescue ships are unsealing,' said Kemlo. He unfastened the locks and slid back the canopy of the scooter when he saw space-suited figures

climbing from the exit chute of the now stationary ships.

'Come and meet us, boys,' said Captain Emrich's voice through the speakers. 'We've got this thing cornered so there won't be any trouble.' His head and shoulders were bright and clear on the screens. Turning for a moment he addressed his operator. 'Contact Control,' he ordered. 'Report action taken and result, and give our position. Feed full power and keep open circuit. I'm going to meet those lads.'

Kemlo helped Krillie from the scooter, but first, to please his friend, he had to make a brief recording for the diary.

'This is Kemlo,' he said. 'Krillie has recorded many of the things which have happened to us since we left Satellite Belt K on the sky patrol, and it has been a wonderful experience for us all. There are a lot of questions we want to ask; there is so much we don't know; but there's a lot not even the scientists know. Perhaps the Star Men will tell us. Krillie has been a great help, and although he's often been frightened, as we all have, I don't know what we should have done without him. When this recording of his diary is transcribed, I will try to make sure that Krillie also records this part of it.'

'You shouldn't have said all that, Kemlo,' said Krillie as they made their way through the gap in the rays and waited for Kartin and

Kerowski to join them. 'If that goes in my diary, the Earth-boys will think I'm a big-head.'

'When you do things properly and show the courage you've shown, you're entitled to be thought a bighead,' Kemlo replied with a grin. 'And anyone who calls you that will be people who have never done anything themselves. They'll only be jealous of you.'

Kartin and Kerowski came up and the four boys exchanged eager comment as they made their way across the yielding surface of the substance, past the now grey mass of what had been a spinning craft—from whose world it had come they knew not—and on until the space-suited figures came up to them with long floating strides.

'I'm Balbo Emrich,' said the first figure, grasping Kemlo's outstretched hand in both his large-jointed space gloves. 'This is Phideus MacAvoy, my second in command. It's a shocking name, so we call him Mac.'

'It's even worse than Balbo,' said the Scots-accented voice, and Kemlo looked up to see a craggy cheerful face beaming at him from behind a space helmet.

Other greetings and introductions followed, and several of the crewmen, who had accompanied Captain Emrich and Mac, good-naturedly chaffed Krillie. He was lifted high into the air by



captain, who was obviously impressed by so young a boy having passed through such experiences.

But after the first boisterous greetings were over, the more serious business of the strange craft and a host of other details, which Kemlo and his friends had to report, took pride of place.

‘That’s how the first one looked when it landed,’ said Kemlo.

‘I wonder what would happen if we released the holding rays?’ said Mac. ‘Think we dare risk it, Skipper?’

‘I don’t see why not,’ the captain replied. ‘And if those things the boys call humpties come out, we can neutralise them and take them as specimens.’

Orders were sent back to the ships to release the rays, and the men and boys moved some distance away from the craft; the men with hands on their ray guns, watching the exit chute.

Sure enough, the exit chute opened, the ramp lowered and two humpties came trundling out of the craft. The space-suited men acted with a deft speed, as if they knew exactly what they were doing. This surprised Kemlo, who exclaimed:

‘They’re neutralising them without any trouble. They seem to know just what to do!’

‘We’ve been after these things for a long time,’ said Mac with a chuckle. ‘There’s a panel in the hull from where you can neutralise the whole robot.’

‘ You mean you’ve seen these things before ? ’

‘ We certainly have.’

‘ It’s a long story,’ Captain Emrich grinned. ‘ You’ll be entitled to hear it when we get back, but right now is not the time for long stories.’ He turned and faced the boys, who were goggling at the sight of the crewmen who were calmly inspecting the neutralised and stationary robots. ‘ You see, boys, we’re Star Men. You wouldn’t know much about our work, and naturally you wouldn’t see any of our confidential reports. Only the Elders and senior technicians of the Inter-planetary Commission see those. Your job was to observe the galaxy, after which your camera records and speech recordings would be studied by us. It was a new idea to save expense and time.’

‘ Why was that ? ’ Kerowski asked politely.

‘ Because we’ve just had a new type of ship, and they cost a lot of money. Our bosses thought that much of our time could be saved if we used you Space Scouts with your small craft to take the preliminary readings of any galaxy which appeared close enough for you to visit from the Belt.’ He added with a chuckle : ‘ Of course, we didn’t expect you to go plummeting through a star cloud, but as it’s turned out, you’ve done a wonderful job.’

‘ Yes, but because of our meddling we destroyed the first craft,’ said Kemlo.

‘ You did,’ the captain agreed frankly, ‘ and

that is to be regretted because we've wanted one of these craft for a long time. But we have finally got one now, so all's well.'

'I don't understand this,' said Kartin. 'Where do these things come from? Who sends them and controls them?'

'We'll tell you,' the captain replied quietly. 'But confidentially, amongst ourselves—amongst us Star Men.'

The boys pressed closer to him, eager to hear this information.

'These craft, as far as we can judge, are sent from Mars,' said Captain Emrich, speaking slowly. 'They are not aggressive, and if you do get hurt by the fiendish little rays they shoot from those tiny pop-guns in the hull of the robots, then you're unlucky, because we believe they are only for self-protection. You see—Mars is a great deal older than Earth, and we're not sure enough yet of all our facts to know just how far in advance of us they are. But one thing is very certain.' He paused and looked around at their serious faces.

'The prize of the stars is and ultimately will be one galaxy which forms in a large enough mass of matter to become another planet,' he continued. 'Whoever controls that planet will have another ready-made satellite. And that, very simply and briefly, is what the whole thing is about. Earth has devised a star patrol and created a Corps of

Star Men, and our job is to investigate all the minor galaxies which appear and report whether they are likely to become, or have a chance of becoming, a planet. It is reasonable to assume that every major planet in the Universe began as a minor galaxy millions of years ago.'

There was silence for a moment, then the captain asked: 'Have you taken any specimens of this substance?'

'Yes, we've got a boxful,' Kemlo replied. 'But it keeps moving all the time.'

'Does it now?' Mac seemed quite interested. 'Then we've really got something this time.'

'Yes,' the captain agreed. 'A planet in the making. If it's moving as you say it is, there are micro-organisms here. A long time after it has ceased to be of any interest to us—maybe forty, fifty thousand years—this will be a planet. And on it things will grow.'

'Phew! That's too far ahead for me to worry about,' Kerowski murmured.

'Well, thanks to you boys, we've got our star investigator from Mars,' said Captain Emrich briskly. 'We'll take him back with us; but first of all we'll see you safely off this hunk of nothing.'

In many ways the boys were sorry to go, but the captain left them in no doubt that he expected them to leave when told to do so, and they felt it would be unwise to disobey any more orders.

They returned to their scooters, sealed up, and set the power units at pressure.

Balbo Emrich in his own ship was going to accompany them through the star cloud, and it was he who gave all the technical instructions and notified Satellite K Control of his intentions.

As soon as the power units in both scooters had warmed up sufficiently, Captain Emrich gave orders to take off. The scooters lifted easily, circled the area three times, then began to climb upward through the pearly light.

The captain's ship passed them on the way up before it slowed, and, by feeding out magnetic impulses through the grid-like structure at the tail of his craft, drew the scooters at terrific speed into the purple-red star cloud which, it seemed for so long, had enclosed them.

The scooters cleaved through it in the wake of the great silver rescue ship, and in less than an hour they were into the void of space—deep blue and clear, and somehow welcoming.

'All right, boys.' Captain Emrich's voice came through the speakers and his head and shoulders appeared on the screens. 'You've done a fine job and we'll clean it up. Now set your course and head for home. We'll be seeing you when we've finished here and all have a get-together.'

'So long, Captain!' Kemlo called. 'Thanks for your rescue.'

'I'll tell you something, Kemlo,' said the

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captain confidentially. 'You could have got off that substance and through the star cloud any time you wanted by merely reversing your magnetic impulses to the front of your scooters. You should remember that next time. All star clouds have magnetic attraction.'

'Oh, dear!' Kemlo groaned. 'Do we never stop learning?'

'No, you never stop learning, Kemlo,' the captain replied curtly. 'That's what makes life interesting. So long now!'

After the scooters had been travelling for another hour, Satellite K Control picked up their beam and, letting Control bring them in, Kemlo and his friends were able to eat and doze, talk and wonder. Then after some thirty hours of fast flying they saw ahead of them the gleaming wheel of Satellite Belt K.

They knew from what the control-room operator had told them that a great welcome was being prepared for them, yet none of the boys could feel really excited about it. They had been through too much in too short a time; and their thoughts were back on the substance, deep in the heart of the whirling star cloud which now was a tiny spatter of light spinning in the far distance.

Then Kemlo smiled to himself as he remembered an Earth saying: 'Stars are the stuff of dreams.'

It seemed rather a silly thing to say.

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